MERRYLIPS

BEULAH MARIE DIX

PAUL & PAT CARRICK
240 MEADOWLARK LANE
APTOS, CA 95003

Merrylips

Beulah Marie Dix

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MERRYLIPS

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HE LAID A HAND ON MERRYLIPS' SHOULDER AND DREW HER TO HIM.

MERRY LIPS

Gift of The People of the United States
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To the Armed Forces

BY

BEULAH MARIE DIX

AUTHOR OF "SOLDIER RIGDALE," "A LITTLE CAPTIVE LAD," ETC.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY
FRANK T. MERRILL

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TO

EVERY LITTLE GIRL

WHO HAS WISHED FOR AN HOUR

TO BE A LITTLE BOY

THIS STORY IS DEDICATED

BY HER FRIEND

THE AUTHOR

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MERRYLIPS

CHAPTER I

A MAID OF OLD

THE little girl's name was Sybil Venner, but she was known as Merrylips. For Sir Thomas Venner, her jolly, bluff father, never by any chance called a child of his by its baptismal name. His tall eldest son, Thomas, answered, whether he liked it or not, to the nickname of Longkin, and Edmund and Philip, the two younger lads, became Munn and Flip, and Katharine, the oldest girl, was Puss, and prim Lucy was Pug.

So when Sir Thomas came riding home from London town and first saw his little daughter Sybil, a baby of three months old, crowing and laughing in her cradle, he cried: —

"'Truth, here's a merry lass! Come to thy dad, little Merrylips."

Thus it was that little Sybil was christened anew,

and Merrylips she remained, to all who loved her, to the end of her story.

The home of little Merrylips was a great old house called Walsover, which stood below a hill hard by a sleepy village of a half-score thatched cottages. The village, too, was called Walsover, and it lay in that pleasant part of merry England known as the county of Wilts.

A remote countryside it was in the days, now more than two long centuries ago, when our Merrylips was romping and laughing in Walsover hall. From Walsover to Salisbury, the market-town, was a journey of many hours on horseback, by roads that were narrow and hard to follow, and full of ruts and stones, and oftentimes heavy with mire.

From Salisbury to London was a journey of days, in a carrier's clumsy wain or on horseback, over downs where shepherds kept their flocks, through country lanes where the may bloomed white in the hedgerows, past little villages that nestled in the shadow of stumpy church towers, through muddy towns where half-timbered gables and latticed casements overhung the crooked streets, across wide commons — this far oftener than was pleasant! — where, in the fear of highwaymen or "padders," the traveller kept a hand upon his pistols, and so at last into the narrow streets amid the

jostling crowd, under the jangling of the bells that swung in the many steeples of great London town.

Of this long, perilous journey Merrylips, from a little child, never tired of hearing her father tell. Four times a year he rode to London, at the head of a little cavalcade of serving-men in blue coats, that made a brave show as they gathered for the start in the courtyard at Walsover. And four times a year, when he came back from London, he brought in his pockets treasures of sugar candy, and green ginger, and raisins of the sun. No wonder that Merrylips longed to take that great journey to London town, to have adventures by the way, and, at the end, come to the place where such sweets were to be found!

But meantime, while she was too young for journeys and adventures, Merrylips lived at Walsover as happily, it would seem, as a little maid might live. Walsover was a rare place in which to play. The house was old and rambling, with odd little chambers hidden beneath the eaves, and odd little windows tucked away among the vines, and odd little steps, when you went from room to room, that you fell up or down — and Merrylips found it hard to remember which!

In the upper story was a long gallery in which to run and romp on the days — and there were many such in the green county of Wilts! — when the rain fell softly.

Downstairs were a great hall, with a balcony for musicians, and dim parlors, all wainscotted in dark wood, where Merrylips grew almost afraid of the pattering sound of her own footsteps.

Better to her liking was the kitchen, with its paved floor and vast fireplace, and the group of buildings that lay beyond the kitchen. There was a brew-house, and a bakehouse, and a dairy, each with its own flagged court, where delightful tasks were always being done. Hard by the dairy was the cow-house, and barns full of sweet-scented hay, and great stables, where Merrylips knew by name and loved all the horses, from her father's bright bay courser to the honest draught beasts. Over against the stables were kennels full of dogs, both for hunting and for fowling. There were rough-coated staghounds, and fleet greyhounds, and setters, and spaniels.

Round this block of buildings and little courts lay gardens and orchards, where wallflowers flamed and roses blew, and apricots and cherries ripened in the sun. And beyond the gardens were on one side rich fields, and on the other a park where rabbits burrowed and deer fed in the dappled shade.

So Merrylips had charming places in which to play, and she had, too, playfellows in plenty. She was the youngest child at Walsover, so she was the pet of every

one, from the least scullery wench in the kitchen and the least horseboy in the stable, to her big, bluff father, Sir Thomas.

Above all, she was dearly loved by her three big brothers. As soon as she was able to toddle, she had begun to follow them about, at their work or play, and when they found her merry always and afraid of nothing, the lads began, half in sport, to give her a share in whatever they took in hand.

From those kind big brothers Merrylips learned to climb and to vault, to pitch a quoit and toss a ball, to sit a horse, and whip a trout-brook, to play fair always, and to keep back the tears when she was hurt. These were good lessons for a little girl, but Merrylips learned others that were not so good. She learned to speak hard words when she was angry, to strike with her little fists, to be rough and noisy. And because it seemed to them droll to see such a mite of a girl copy these faults of theirs, her brothers and sometimes even her father laughed and did not chide her.

In all the house of Walsover there was no one to say Merrylips nay except her mother, Lady Venner. Of her mother Merrylips stood in great fear. Lady Venner was a silent woman, who was very busy with the cares of her large household and of the whole estate, which was left to her management when her husband was

away. She had little time to spend on her youngest daughter, and that little she used, as seemed to her wise, in trying to correct the faults that her husband and sons had fostered in the child. So Merrylips soon came to think of her mother as always chiding her, or forbidding her some pleasure, or setting her some task.

These tasks Merrylips hated. She did not mind so much when she was taught to read and write by the chaplain, for Munn and Flip, before they went away to Winchester School, had also had lessons to say to him. But when she was set down with a needle, to be taught all manner of stitches by her mother's waiting-woman, or bidden to strum a lute, under sister Puss's instruction, she fairly cried with rage and rebellion.

For down in her little heart, so secret that none had suspected, Merrylips kept the hope that she might grow up a boy. To be a boy meant to run and play, with no hindering petticoats to catch the heels and trip the toes. It meant to go away to school or to camp. It meant to be a soldier and have adventures, such as her father had had when he was a captain in the Low Countries.

To be a girl, on the other hand, meant to sew long seams and sit prettily in a quiet room, until the time, years and years away, when one was very old. Then one married, and went to another house, and there sat in another quiet room and sewed more seams till the

end of one's life. No wonder Merrylips prayed with all her heart to grow up a boy!

To her mind the granting of this prayer did not seem impossible. To be sure, she wore petticoats, but so had Longkin and Munn and Flip when they were little. If she did all the things that boys did, she had no doubt that in time she should, like them, pass beyond the stage of petticoats.

But in this plan she was balked by her mother's orders to sew and play the lute and help in the still-room and do all the foolish things that girls were set to do. That was why Merrylips cried and raged over her needlework, and she raged still harder on the day about which you now shall hear.

Sir Thomas, who had been to Salisbury market, came riding home, one sweet summer evening, and cried lustily in the hall: —

"Merrylips! Halloo! Where beest thou, little jade?"

When Merrylips came running down the staircase, with her flyaway hair all blown about her face, he caught her and tossed her in his arms and said, laughing: —

"Hast got thee a sweetheart without thine old dad's knowing? Here's a packet for thine own small self, come by carrier to Salisbury town."

Now when Merrylips looked at the packet of which her father spoke, a little box that lay upon the table beside his whip and gloves, her eyes sparkled, for she guessed what it held. Only the month before her brother Munn, in a letter that he wrote from Winchester, had promised to send her a fish-line of hair that she much wanted and a four-penny whittle that should be her very own.

"'Tis from Munn!" she cried, and struggled from her father's arms, though he made believe to hold her hard, and ran to the table.

"There you are out, little truepenny!" said Sir Thomas.

He cast himself into a chair that his man might draw off his great riding boots. Lady Venner and tall Puss and rosy Pug, who loved her needle, had come into the hall at the sound of his voice, and to Lady Venner he now spoke:—

"'Tis a packet come out of Sussex, from thine old gossip, Lady Sybil Fernefould."

"Ay, our Sybil's godmother," said Lady Venner. "What hath she sent thee, little one?"

All flushed with joy and pride, for never in her life had she received a packet all her own — nor, for that matter, had Puss or Pug — Merrylips tore open the box. Instantly she gave a sharp cry of anger. Within

the box, wrapped in a piece of fair linen, lay a doll, made of cloth, and daintily dressed in a bodice and petticoat of thin figured silk, with little sleeves of lawn and a neat cloak and hood.

"'Tis a mammet — a vild mammet!" screamed Merrylips, and dashed it to the floor and struck it with her foot.

"Oh, Merrylips!" cried Pug, in her soft voice, and caught up the doll and cuddled it to her breast. "'Tis so sweet a baby! Look, Puss! It hath a whisket of lawn, and the under-petticoat, 'tis of fair brocade."

"A mammet — a girl's toy!" repeated Merrylips, and stamped her foot. "My godmother shall not send me such. I will not be a girl. I'll be a lad."

"Well said! And so thou shalt, if wishing will do't, my bawcock!" laughed Sir Thomas.

But Lady Venner looked on in silence, and her face was grave.

CHAPTER II

HER BIRTHDAY

GENTLE Pug took the doll, and, in the moments when she was not setting neat stitches or baking custards, played with it prettily. Meantime Merrylips went romping her own way, and soon had forgotten both the doll and the godmother that had sent it.

This godmother Merrylips knew only by name, as the Lady Sybil Fernefould, her mother's old friend, a dread and distant being to whom, in her mother's letters, she was trained to send her duty. She had never seen Lady Sybil, nor, after the gift of the doll, did she wish to see her.

Through the summer days that followed Merrylips was busy with matters of deeper interest than dolls and godmothers. She rode on the great wains, loaded with corn, that lumbered behind the straining horses to the barns of Walsover. She helped to gather fruit—plums and pears and rosy apples. She watched her father's men, while they thrashed the rye and wheat or made cider and perry. She shaped a little mill-wheel

with the four-penny whittle that Munn, true to his promise, at last had sent her, and set it turning in the brook below the paddock.

Almost in a day, it seemed to her, the time slipped by, till it was two months and more since she had been so angry at her godmother's gift. Michaelmas tide was near, and by a happy chance all three of her tall brothers were home from Winchester School and from college at Oxford.

It was a clear, windy day of autumn in the first week of their home-coming, — the very day, so it chanced, on which Merrylips was eight years old. She was sitting on the flagstones of the west terrace of Walsover, eating a crisp apple and warding off the caresses of three favorite hounds, Fox and Shag and Silver, while she watched her brothers playing at bowls.

They had thrown off their doublets in the heat of the game, and their voices rang high and boyish.

"Fairly cast!"

"A hit! A hit!"

Indeed, they were no more than boys, those three big brothers. Tall Longkin himself, for all his swagger and the rapier that he sometimes wore, was scarcely eighteen. Munn, a good lad in the saddle but a dullard at his book, was three years younger, and Flip, with the curly pate, was not yet turned thirteen.

But to Merrylips they were almost men and heroes who had gone out into the world, though it was but the world of Winchester School and of Oxford. With all her heart she loved and believed in them, those tall brothers. How happy she felt to be seated near them, pillowed among the dogs and munching her apple, where at any moment she could catch Munn's eyes or answer Flip's smile! She thought that she should be happy to sit thus forever.

While she watched, the game came to an end with a notable strong cast from Longkin that made her clap her hands and cry, "Oh, brave!"

Then the three, laughing and wiping their hot foreheads on their shirt-sleeves, came sauntering to the spot where Merrylips sat and flung themselves down beside her among the dogs.

"Give me a bite of thine apple, little greedy-chaps!" said Munn, and cast his arm about Merrylips' neck and drew her to him.

"To-morrow, lads," said Longkin, who was stretched at his ease with his head upon the hound Silver, "say, shall we go angling in Walsover mead?"

"Take me!" cried Merrylips, with her mouth full. "Oh, take me too, good Longkin!"

"Thou art too small, pigwidgeon," said Flip.

"I ben't," clamored Merrylips. "I can trudge

stoutly and never cry, I promise ye. I be as apt to go as thou, Flip Venner. Thou hast but four years the better of me."

"Ay, but I am a lad, and thou art but a wench," said Flip.

He had had the worst of the game with his elder brothers, poor Flip! So he was not in the sweetest of humors.

"I care not!" Merrylips said stoutly. "Where thou canst go, Flip, *I* can go!"

At this they all laughed, even that tall youth Longkin, who was growing to stand upon his dignity.

"Come, Merrylips!" Longkin teased. "What wilt thou do an Flip get him a long sword and go to war? 'Tis likely he may do so."

"And that's no jest," cried Flip, most earnestly. "Father saith an the base Puritan fellows lower not their tone, all we that be loyal subjects to the king must e'en march forth and trounce 'em."

"Then Heaven send they lower not their tone!" added Munn. "I be wearied of Ovid and Tully. Send us a war, and speedily, that I may toss my dreary book to the rafters and go trail a pike like a lad of spirit!"

"So you'll go unto the wars, you two?" Longkin kept on teasing. "Then hang me if Merrylips shall

not make a third! 'Hath as good right as either of ye babies to esteem herself a soldier."

Then Flip and Munn cast themselves upon the scoffing eldest brother and mauled him gloriously in a welter of yelping dogs. Like a loyal heart Merrylips tossed by her apple and ran in to aid the weaker side, where she cuffed Flip and tugged at Munn's arm with no mean skill.

But in the thick of the fray she got a knock on the nose from Flip's elbow, and promptly she lost her hot little temper. She did not cry, for she had been too well trained by those big brothers, but she screamed, "Hang thee, varlet!" and hurled herself upon Flip.

She heard Longkin cry, "Our right old Merrylips!"

Through the haze that swam before her eyes, which were all dazzled with the knock that she had got, she saw Flip's laughing face, as he warded her off, and she raged at him for laughing. Then, all at once, she heard her shrill little voice raging in a dead stillness, and in the stillness she heard a grave voice speak.

"Sybil! Little daughter!"

Merrylips let fall her clenched hands. Shamefacedly she turned, and in the doorway that opened on the terrace she saw Lady Venner stand.

"Honored mother!" faltered Merrylips, and stumbled through a courtesy.

All in a moment she longed to cry with pain and shame and fright, but she would not, while her brothers looked on. Instead she blinked back the tears, and at a sign from her mother started to follow her into the house.

"If it like you, good mother, the fault was mine to vex the child," said Longkin.

But the mother answered sternly, "Peace!" and so led Merrylips away.

In the cool parlor, where the long shadows of late afternoon made the corners as dim as if it were twilight, Lady Venner sat down on the broad window-seat. Merrylips stood meekly before her, and while she waited thus in the quiet, where the terrace and the dogs and the lads seemed to have drawn far away, she grew aware that her hair was tousled, and her hands were soiled and scratched. She was so ashamed that she cast down her eyes, and then she blushed to see how the toes of her shoes were stubbed. Stealthily she bent her knees and tried to cover her unmaidenly shoes with the hem of her petticoat.

"Little daughter," said Lady Venner, "or haply should I say — little son?"

Then, in spite of herself, Merrylips smiled, as she was always ready to do, for she liked that title.

Straightway Lady Venner changed her tone.

"Son I must call you," she said gravely, "for I cannot recognize a daughter of mine in this unmannered hoiden. For more than two months, Sybil, I have made my plans to send you where under other tutors than unthinking lads you may be schooled to gentler ways. What I have seen this hour confirmeth my resolve. This day week you will quit Walsover."

"Quit Walsover — and Munn and Flip and Longkin?" Merrylips repeated; but thanks to the schooling of the unthinking lads, her brothers, breathed hard and did not cry.

"You will go," said Lady Venner, "to your dear godmother, Lady Sybil, at her house of Larkland in the Weald of Sussex. She hath long been fain of your company, and in her household I know that you will receive such nurture as becometh a maid. Now go unto my woman and be made tidy."

In silence Merrylips courtesied and stumbled from the room. Just outside, in the hall, she ran against Munn, who caught her by the sleeve.

"What's amiss wi' thee?" he asked. "Did our mother chide thee roundly, little sweetheart?"

"I be going hence," said Merrylips, and blinked fast. "I be going to mine old godmother — she that sent me a vild mammet — and I know I'll hate her fairly! Oh, tell me, dear Munn, where might her house of Larkland be? Is't far from Walsover?"

"A long distance," said Munn; and his face was troubled for the little girl he loved.

"Is't farther than Winchester?" Merrylips urged in a voice that to his ears seemed near to breaking.

He was an honest lad, this Munn; and though he did not like to say it, spoke the truth.

"Ay, dear heart," he said, "'tis farther even than Winchester thou wilt go, but yet —"

Merrylips tossed back her flyaway hair.

"Tell that unto Flip!" she cried. "He hath been but unto Winchester, and now I'll go farther than Winchester! I'll journey farther than Master Flip, though he be a lad and I but a wench!"

She lifted a stanch little face to her brother, and smiled upon him, undismayed.

CHAPTER III

OUT IN THE WORLD

At first Merrylips found it easy to be brave. She was given a pretty new cloak and gown. She was pitied by the serving-maids, and envied by her sisters, and petted by her brothers, because she was going on a long journey.

Better still, she found it easy to be, not only brave, but merry, like herself, on the autumn morning when she was mounted on a pillion behind one of the serving-men in her father's little cavalcade. For, girl though Flip had called her, she was leaving Walsover at last on that wondrous journey to great London town.

For five long days they rode among the scenes that Merrylips knew from her father's tales. They passed through fields that were brown with autumn, and villages where homely smoke curled from the chimneys. They clattered through towns where beggar children ran at the horses' stirrups and whined for ha'pennies. They crossed great wastes of common, where Merry-

lips half hoped that they might meet with padders, so sure was she that her father and his stout serving-men could guard her from all harm.

For four wonderful nights they halted at snug inns, where civil landladies courtesied to Merrylips. They supped together, Merrylips and her father, and he plied her with cakes and cream and oyster pies that she felt her mother would have forbidden. After supper she sat on his knee, while he sipped his claret by the blazing fire, till for very weariness she drooped her head against his shoulder and slept. Then, if she woke in the night, she would find herself laid in a big, strange bed, and she would wonder how she had ever come there.

A happy journey it was, through the clear autumn weather! But the happiest day of all was the one when, toward sunset, Merrylips was shown a pile of roofs, where spires and towers rose sharp against the pale glow of the eastern sky. Yonder was London, so her father said.

A little later, in the twilight, they were clattering through paved streets. Above them frowned dim houses, and on all sides were hurrying folk that jostled one another. This was London, Merrylips said over and over to herself, and in the London of her dreams she planned to have many gay hours, like those of the days that were just passed.

But in this Merrylips was sadly disappointed. Next morning Sir Thomas, who had been her playmate since they left Walsover, was closeted with some of his friends, — men who wore long swords and talked loudly of church and king. He had no time to spend with his little daughter, so Merrylips had to go walk with Mawkin, the stout Walsover lass who was to wait upon her, and a serving-man who should guard them through the streets.

On this walk Merrylips found that though there were raisins of the sun, and oranges, and sugar candy in the London shops, just as she had dreamed, these sweets — unlike her dreams! — were to be had only by paying for them. She found too that the streets of London were rough and dirty and full of rude folk. They paid no heed to her pretty new cloak and gown, but jostled her uncivilly.

Once Merrylips and her companions were forced to halt by a crowd of staring folk that blocked the way. In the midst of the crowd they saw that a prentice lad and a brisk young page were hard at fisticuffs.

"Rogue of a Cavalier!" taunted the prentice.

In answer the other lad jeered: "Knave of a Roundhead!"

Then the spectators took sides and urged them on to fight.

"What be they, Cavaliers and Roundheads that they prate of, good Mawkin?" asked Merrylips.

Mawkin, who was gaping at the fight, said tartly that she knew not.

But the serving-man, Stephen Plasket, said: "'Tis thus, little mistress: all gentlefolk who are for our gracious king are called by the name of Cavaliers, while the vile knaves who would resist him are Roundheads."

"Then I am a Cavalier," said Merrylips.

At that moment Mawkin cried: "Lawk! he hath it fairly!"

There was the young page tumbled into the mud, with his nose a-bleeding!

"O me!" lamented Merrylips. "If Munn were but here, *he* would 'a' learned that prentice boy a lesson, not to mock at us Cavaliers. I would that my brother Munn stood here!"

Not till she had spoken the words did Merrylips realize how from her heart she wished that Munn were there. She wanted him, not only to beat the rude prentice boy, but to cheer her with the sight of his face. For the first time she realized that she longed to see Munn, or even prim Pug, or any of the dear folk that she had left at Walsover.

When once she had realized this, she found that

London was a dreary place, and she was tired of her journey in the world. From that moment she found it quite useless to try to be merry, and hard even to seem brave, and every hour she found it harder.

There was the bad hour of twilight, when she sat alone by the fire in her father's chamber. She listened to the rumble of coaches in the street below and the cry of a street-seller: "Hot fine oat-cakes, hot!" She found something in the sound so doleful that she wanted to cry.

There was the lonely hour when she woke in the night and did not know where she was. When she remembered at last that she was in London, bound for Larkland in Sussex, she lay wide-eyed and wondered what would happen to her at her godmother's house, till through the chamber window the dawn came, bleak and gray.

Last, and worst, there was the bitter hour when she sat, perched on high at Mawkin's side, in a carrier's wagon. She looked down at her father, and he stood looking up at her. She knew that in a moment the wagon would start on its long journey into Sussex, and he would be left behind in London town.

Merrylips managed to smile, as she waved her hand to her father in farewell, but it was an unsteady little smile. And when once the clumsy wagon had lum-

bered out of the inn-yard, and she could no longer catch a glimpse of her father's sturdy figure, she hid her face against Mawkin's shoulder.

"Cheerly, mistress my pretty!" comforted Mawkin. "Do but look upon the jolly fairings your good father hath given you. If here be not quince cakes — yes, and gingerbread, and comfits! Mercy cover us! Comfits enough to content ye the whole journey, even an ye had ten mouths 'stead o' one. And as I be christom woman, here are fair ribbons, and such sweet gloves,— yes, and a silver shilling in a little purse of silk. Do but look thereon!"

"Oh, I care not for none of 'em," said Merrylips. "Leave me be, good Mawkin!"

But all that day Mawkin chattered. She pointed out sheep and kine and crooked-gabled houses, and men that were scouring ditches or mending hedges. Indeed, she tried her best to amuse her young mistress.

Merrylips found her talk wearisome, but next day, when Mawkin, who was vexed at her dumpishness, kept sulkily silent, she found the silence harder still to bear. She did not wish to think too much about her godmother, for the nearer she came to her, the more afraid of her she grew. So, to take up her mind, she ate the comfits and the cakes with which her father had heaped her lap. It was no wonder, then, that on the

third day of her journey she had an ache in the head that was almost as hard to bear as the ache in her heart.

About mid-afternoon a chill, fine rain began to fall. Mawkin, all huddled in her cloak, slept by snatches, and woke at the lurching of the wagon, and grumbled because she was wakened. But Merrylips dared not sleep lest she tumble from her place. So she sat clinging fast to Mawkin's cloak with her cold little hands, while through the drizzling rain she stared at the plashy fields and the sheep that cowered in the shelter of the dripping hedges.

At last, in the deepening twilight, she saw the dim fronts of houses where candles, set in lanterns, were flaring gustily. She knew that the wagon had halted in the ill-smelling court of an inn. She saw the steam curl upward from the horses' flanks, and heard the snap of buckles and clatter of shafts, as the stable-lads unhitched the wagon.

"Come, little mistress!" spoke the big carrier, who had clambered on the wheel near Merrylips. "Here we be, come to the inn at Horsham and the end of our journey. Ye must light down."

"I will not!" cried Merrylips, and clung to the seat with stiffened hands. "I'll sit here forever till ye go back unto London. I'll not bide here in your loathly Sussex. I do hate your Sussex. I'll not light down. I'll not, I tell ye!"

Mawkin, half awake, spoke sharply: "Hold your peace, I pray you, mistress!"

One of the stable boys laughed, and with that laughter in her ears, Merrylips felt herself lifted bodily into the big carrier's arms and set down on her feet in the courtyard. The world was all against her, she thought, and it was a world of rain and darkness in which she felt small and weak and lonely. In sudden terror she caught at the carrier's sleeve.

"Oh, master, take me back to London!" she cried. "I'll give ye my new silver shilling. I cannot bide here — indeed, you know not! I like not your Sussex — and I be feared of mine old godmother. Oh, master, take me back wi' you to my daddy in London town!"

Then, while she pleaded, Merrylips felt two hands, eager hands but gentle, laid on her shoulders.

"Little lass!" said a woman's voice. "Thou art cold and shivering. Do thou come in out of the storm."

"I'm fain to go back!" cried Merrylips.

She turned toward this stranger who was friendly, but saw her all blurred through a mist of rain and of tears.

"All in good time!" the kind voice went on. "If thou art fain to be gone, thou shalt go, but for now — come in from the storm."

Merrylips went obediently, with her hand in the

hand that was held out to her. Too tired to question or to wonder, she found herself in a snug, warm chamber where candles burned on the table and a fire snapped on the hearth. She found herself seated in a great cushioned chair, with the shoes slipped from her numbed feet and the wet cloak drawn from her shoulders. She found herself drinking new milk and eating wheaten bread, that tasted good after the sweets on which she had feasted, and always she found her new friend with the kind voice moving to and fro and ministering to her.

Shyly Merrylips looked upon the stranger. She saw that she was a very old woman, no doubt, for her soft brown hair was touched with gray, but she had fresh cheeks and bright eyes and the kindest smile in the world. Then she saw the kind face mistily, and knew that she had nodded with sleepiness.

A little later she found herself laid in a soft bed, between fair sheets of linen, and she was glad to see that the stranger, her friend, was seated by the bedside.

"Oh, mistress!" said Merrylips, and stretched forth her hand. "Did you mean it in sober truth — that you will aid me to go back to London — away from mine old godmother?"

Then the gentlewoman laughed, with eyes and lips.

"Oh, my little lass!" she said, and knelt and put her arms about Merrylips where she lay. "Hast thou not guessed that I am that poor old godmother thou wouldst run from? I pray thee, dear child, stay with me but a little, for I am sadly lonely."

All in a moment, as she looked into the face that bent above her, Merrylips grew sorry that she had thrown the poor doll on the floor and kicked it too. She felt almost as if she had struck a blow at this kind soul who had come to befriend her when she had felt so tired and lost.

She spoke no word, because of the lump that rose in her throat, but she put both arms about her godmother's neck.

And when her godmother said: "We shall be friends, then, little Merrylips?" Merrylips nodded, with her head nestled against her godmother's breast.

CHAPTER IV

AT LARKLAND

NEXT day, when the storm was over and the sky was a windy blue, Merrylips rode in her godmother's coach to her godmother's house of Larkland. And there at Larkland, with the godmother that she had so feared to meet, Merrylips lived for almost a year and was very happy.

Larkland, to be sure, was a tiny house beside great Walsover. There were no lads to play with, and there were no dogs, except one fat old spaniel. There was no great company of serving-men and maids to watch at their tasks and be friends with. Neither was there a going and coming of guests and kinsfolk to keep the house in a stir.

Yet Merrylips found much to please her. Though the house was little, it was very old. It was said to have a hidden chamber in the wall, such as great Walsover could not boast. And with her own eyes Merrylips could see that there was a moat, half choked with water-weeds, and a pond full of carp that came sluggishly to the surface when crumbs were flung to them.

Though there were not many servants, there was among them an old butler, who all his life had served Lady Sybil's father, the Duke of Barrisden. He taught Merrylips to shoot at the butts with a crossbow, and while he taught her, told her tales of how, as a young man, he had gone with his Grace, the duke, to fight the Spaniards at Cadiz and to serve against the Irish kern in Connaught.

There was too an old, old woman who had been nurse to Lady Sybil's mother. She sat knitting all day in a warm corner by the kitchen hearth or on a sunny bench against the garden wall. This old woman, in her old, cracked voice, would sing to Merrylips long ballads — *The Lord of Lorn and the False Steward*, and *Chevy Chace*, and *The Fair Flower of Northumberland*. At such times Merrylips listened with round eyes and forgot to miss her brothers.

But dearer to Merrylips even than Roger, the butler, or Goody Trot, the old nurse, or even Mawkin, her own kind maid from Walsover, was her godmother, Lady Sybil. For Lady Sybil, dwelling in that forgotten corner of Sussex, with only her few servants, was, as she had said, a lonely woman. She had a heartful of love to give to Merrylips, and it was a love that had wisdom to find the way to lead the little maid to what was for her good. So Merrylips, to her own surprise, found

herself presently sewing seams and making tarts and toiling over lessons. In short, she did all the tasks that she had hated to do at Walsover, yet now she did them happily.

This was partly because she felt that she should do the bidding of her godmother, who so plainly loved her, and partly because the tasks were put before her in so pleasant a way. When she sewed seams, she was learning to make shirts and handkerchiefs for Longkin and Munn and Flip. When she baked a burnt and heavy little pasty, she was learning to cook — a knowledge that in camp might prove most useful to a gentleman. When she struggled with inky pothooks, she was learning to write long letters to her dear, big brothers.

There were other lessons, too, that Merrylips had not had at Walsover. Lady Sybil taught her Latin, in which she was herself an apt scholar, and Merrylips set herself eagerly to learn this tongue, because it was what her brothers studied.

Lady Sybil gave her easy lessons in surgery and the use of simples. Sometimes she even let her be present when she herself dressed the hurts or prescribed for the ills of the poor folk of Cuckstead, the little hamlet that lay hard by the walls of Larkland. This art Merrylips was glad to be taught, and she spoke often of

the use it would be to her when she was a grown lad and went to the wars.

Somehow, when once she had put this secret hope into words and her godmother had not laughed, Merrylips began herself to feel that such a thought was babyish. In those quiet days at Larkland she began to grow up and to realize, with bitter disappointment, that she was likely to grow up a girl. She talked of this sometimes at twilight with her godmother, and was much comforted.

"For thou mayst have all the true virtues of a lad, dear little heart," Lady Sybil would say. "Thou canst be brave and truthful as any of thy brothers, not fearing to bear hard knocks, but fearing to bestow them on any that be weaker than thyself. I do not chide thee that thou wouldst be a man, my Merrylips, but I would have thee more than that — a gentleman."

So Merrylips tried to be a gentleman. She tried not to show a naughty temper, nor speak rudely to the serving-folk, but to be courteous and considerate always of those about her. And at times she found this a far harder task than sewing seams or reading Latin.

But life at Larkland was far from being all tasks. There were hours when Lady Sybil played to Merrylips upon the lute or the virginals and sang sweet old songs. There were other hours, while they sat to-

gether at their sewing, when Lady Sybil told wondrous tales of what she had done when she lived with her father in Paris and at the Hague and in great London town.

"I had no brothers as thou hast, Merrylips," said Lady Sybil, "but I had one dear sister, Venetia, and a sad madcap she was! By times thou dost mind me of her, honey."

One wintry afternoon, when she had talked for a long time of the Lady Venetia's pranks and plays in their girlhood together, Lady Sybil fetched a miniature from a cabinet in her chamber and showed it to Merrylips. It was the portrait of a girl of much the same age as sister Puss, Merrylips thought — a beautiful girl, with soft brown hair parted from a white forehead, and eyes that laughed, and a finger laid upon her rosy lips. On the upraised finger, Merrylips noticed, was an odd ring of two hearts entwined, wrought in what seemed dull silver.

"This is my sister Venetia," said Lady Sybil. "So she looked at eighteen, save that she was fairer than any picture."

"She is not so fair as you, godmother mine!" Merrylips declared.

Lady Sybil smiled in answer, but faintly. Indeed, as she looked upon the picture, she sighed.

"And is she dead, this sister you did love?" Merrylips hushed her voice to ask.

"Ay, long years dead," Lady Sybil answered. "'Tis a piteous tale that some day thou shalt hear, but not till thou art older."

She put away the miniature and spoke no more of the Lady Venetia. But all the rest of the day she seemed burdened with heavy thoughts.

But at most times Lady Sybil, although she seemed to Merrylips so very old, was a gay companion. At evening, when the fire danced on the hearth and the reflected glow danced on the oak panels of the parlor wainscot, she would dance too, and she taught Merrylips to dance. Sometimes even she would play at games of hunt and hide, all up and down the dim corridors and shadowy chambers of the old house. When they were tired, Lady Sybil and Merrylips would sit by the hearth and roast crabs or crack nuts, and Merrylips, like a little gentleman, would pick out the nutmeats for Lady Sybil.

By day, in the pale sunlight, they would walk in the garden and scatter crumbs for the birds that found it hard to live in the rimy days of winter. Or they would stroll through tiny Cuckstead village, where Lady Sybil would talk with the cottage women, and Merrylips would talk with the rosy village lads of lark-traps

and badger hunts and the best way in which to cover a hand-ball.

So the days trod on one another's heels. Merrylips heard the waits sing beneath her chamber window on a Christmas eve of frosty stars. Almost the next week, it seemed, Candlemas had come, and she had found a pale snowdrop in a sheltered corner of the garden and run to lay it in Lady Sybil's hand. Then each week, almost each day, she found a new flower by the moist brookside, or heard a new bird-note in the budding hedgerows, till spring had come in earnest, and it was Whitsunday, and in good Sussex fashion Lady Sybil and Merrylips dined on roast veal and gooseberry pudding.

From time to time, through these happy months, Merrylips had had letters, all her own, from her kindred. Her mother had written to bid her remember her duty to her godmother, and Pug to say that she was reading *A Garland of Virtuous Dames*. Munn had written twice, and each time had said he hoped that there would soon be war in England, for 'twas time that the king's men schooled the rebel Roundheads to their duty. Then Merrylips remembered the two lads that she had seen at fisticuffs in the London street, and wondered if it were true that outside of peaceful Larkland grown men were making ready to fly at one another's throats, and found it hard to believe.

But soon after Whitsuntide Merrylips had a letter from Flip, which Lady Sybil read aloud to her. Flip wrote boastfully that he too was soon to see London, as well as Merrylips, only he, being a lad, was to ride thither as a soldier. Father was raising a troop to fight for the king, and he and Longkin and Munn were going to the wars. Maybe, he added loftily, he would send Merrylips a pretty fairing from London, when he had entered the town as a conqueror.

"Oh," cried Merrylips, most dismally. "I would I were a lad! Here'll be brave fighting, and Flip will have a hand therein while I must sit at home. I do so envy him!"

There Lady Sybil hushed her, laying an arm about her neck.

"Little one," she said, "thou knowest not what thou dost say. War in the land meaneth burned houses and wasted fields and slain men — men dear unto their daughters and their sisters, even as thy father and thy brothers are dear unto thee. Oh, little heart, instead of wishing to look on the sorry work of war, pray rather that peace, even at this late hour, be granted to our poor England."

Now Merrylips understood little of this, except that she grieved her godmother when she wished for war. So she did not speak again in that strain, but in her

heart she hoped, if war must come, that she might somehow have a share in the fighting, as well as Flip. She even at night, when she had prayed for peace as Lady Sybil bade, added a prayer of her own: —

"But if there be any tall soldiers must needs come into these parts, grant that I may be brought to have a sight of 'em!"

Once, in a roundabout way, she asked Mawkin if this prayer were likely to be granted.

"Lawk, no!" cried Mawkin. "There's be no soldiery come into this nook-shotten corner. Put aside that whimsey, mistress."

But Merrylips still said her little prayer, and, in spite of Mawkin, it was answered, for before the month was out two of the king's soldiers had indeed come to Larkland.

CHAPTER V

AMONG THE GOLDEN GORSE

YET for all her hoping and wishing Merrylips did not recognize her soldiers of the king, when first she set eyes on them. She had been out with Mawkin, one shimmery hot afternoon, to gather broom-flowers on Cuckstead common. She had also found a lively little green snake, which she was carrying home in her handkerchief to show to her godmother.

"And indeed my lady will not thank you for the sight of such vermin!" protested Mawkin. "It giveth me creeps but to look thereon. Put it down, do 'ee now, there's my lovey mistress."

Merrylips shook her head, and held fast to her handkerchief. So intent was she upon the snake that she did not look up till she heard a sudden little cry from Mawkin. At that moment they had come to the top of a little swell of land, too gentle to be called a hill, whence they could look down on the roofs of Larkland and the thatched cottages of the village that nestled against its wall. They had reached indeed the highest point of Cuckstead common, and there, couched among

the golden gorse, a boy was lying and a man was sitting by his side.

So well were the strangers screened that Mawkin had not spied them till she was almost upon them. She gave a start of natural terror and laid her hand on Merrylips' shoulder.

"Trudge briskly, mistress!" she bade, in a low voice. "I like not the look of yonder fellow."

As she spoke, Mawkin glanced anxiously at the roofs of the village, which were a good half mile away across the lonely common.

But Merrylips, who knew nothing of fear, halted short. To be sure, the man seemed a rough fellow. He was low-browed, with a shock of fair hair and a sunburnt face. His leathern breeches and frieze doublet were soiled and travel-stained, and he had laid on the ground beside him a bundle wrapped in a handkerchief and a great knotted cudgel. He looked as Merrylips fancied a padder might look, but there was a helpless distress in his pale eyes that made her, in spite of Mawkin's whisper, turn to him.

"Were you fain to speak unto me?" asked Merrylips.

The man peered upon her stupidly beneath his thatch of light hair, and seemed to grope for words.

"Ja, ja, gracious fräulein," he said, in a thick,

foreign speech. "Rupert, mein kindlein — he beeth outworn — sick."

At that the boy, who had lain face down among the flowering gorse, turned languidly and lifted his head. He was a young boy, not so old as Flip. He did not look like the man, for his hair was dark and soft, and his eyes were gray. Indeed he would have been a handsome boy, for all his mean garments, if his eyes had not been dulled and his face flushed with weariness or with fever.

"Let be, Claus!" he said, in a weak voice. "I'll be better straightway, and then we'll trudge."

But as he spoke, he let his dark head sink on his arms once more.

"He cannot lie in the fields," the man said thickly. "Gracious fräulein — bring us to shelter!"

"Haply you may find charitable folk in the next village," struck in Mawkin, who still was tugging at Merrylips' arm. "Come, mistress!"

But Merrylips cried, "Fie upon you, Mawkin! There's shelter at Larkland for all who ask it. An you can bear your son thither, good fellow, my godmother will make you welcome."

The man stared, as if he were slow to understand, but the boy dragged himself to his knees.

"She saith — there's shelter," he panted. "Take me thither, good Claus."

Slowly they set out for Larkland, all four together, for Merrylips would not leave her chance guests, and Mawkin, though she grumbled beneath her breath, would not leave Merrylips. Claus, as the man was called, half carried the boy Rupert, holding him up with one arm about him, and Merrylips walked at the boy's side, and cheered him as well as she could by repeating that it was not far to Larkland.

So they passed down the gentle slope of the common, with their shadows long upon the right hand, through the heavy scent of the gorse, amid the droning of bees. Always thereafter the warm, fruity fragrance of gorse brought to Merrylips the picture of the common, all golden with bloom, the feel of the sun upon her neck, and the sight of Rupert's strained and suffering face, that was so sadly at variance with the gay weather.

More than once they had to pause and sit by the path, while the lad rested, leaning his heavy head upon Claus's shoulder. The first time Merrylips tried to comfort him by showing him the little green snake, but he would scarcely look upon it, so in disappointment she let it go free.

After that she talked with Claus. Had they come from far, she asked him?

"From beyond seas," he answered with a clumsy gesture to the south. "Yonder — they call it Bright-

MORE THAN ONCE THEY HAD TO PAUSE AND SIT BY THE PATH, WHILE THE LAD RESTED.

helmstone — we came a-land. We are bound to the king's army."

"Ay, the king," said Rupert, suddenly, and opened his eyes. "I am going to fight for the king of England, even as my father fought. For," said he, and his eyes sought Merrylips' face, yet seemed not to see her, "I am English born."

Claus hushed him there, speaking in a tongue that Merrylips did not know, but she had scarcely heeded Rupert's last words in her joy at finding out that these strangers were recruits for the king's army.

"Oh!" said she. "You are going to the wars, even as my brothers will go."

Jealously she looked at Rupert, who indeed seemed very childish as he rested in the circle of Claus's arm.

"He is but little older than I," said Merrylips. "Can he fight?"

"One winter in the camps he hath been with me, in Bohemia," Claus answered, when he had taken time to understand her question. "When he is taller, ja, he will be a trooper, and a gallant one."

"I'll be no trooper," said the boy, scarcely raising his eyelids. "I'll be captain of a troop, as was my father."

"Fine prattle for a beggar brat!" Mawkin grumbled.

But Merrylips gazed with adoring eyes on the big,

rough man, who no longer seemed to her like a padder, and the slender boy, who talked so lightly of fighting for the king and winning captaincies.

"'Tis happy chance," said she, "that you came unto Larkland, for we are here all Cavaliers, even as yourselves, and were I a lad, I'd go unto the wars with you."

Then she met Rupert's eyes, fixed full upon her, and for the first time, in all his pain, Rupert smiled, seeing her earnestness, and his smile was winning.

"I would you were a lad and my brother, mistress!" he said.

Mawkin gave a little snort.

"A landleaper such as thou a brother to Sir Thomas Venner's daughter!" she cried.

But Merrylips leaned nearer and laid her hand on the boy's limp fingers.

"You are coming unto Larkland to be made well," she said, "and oh, Rupert! in very truth we'll be as good friends as if we were indeed born brothers."

CHAPTER VI

THE TART THAT WAS NEVER BAKED

WELLADAY, as Merrylips would herself have said, 'twas passing strange, the way of wise, grown folk, even of such kind folk as her own dear godmother!

Merrylips had thought that the bed in the great chamber would be made ready at once for Rupert. She had thought that she herself should be allowed to sit by him and tend him, as if he had been indeed her brother. But instead Lady Sybil, with her usual kindness for the sick and needy, neither more nor less, bade make a bed for the boy in the chamber above the ox-house, where some of the farm-servants used to lodge. And though she went herself to see that he was made comfortable, she would not let Merrylips go near him.

"But I thought 'twould pleasure you," Merrylips faltered, "to aid one that was a soldier to the king."

"And so it doth, sweetheart," said Lady Sybil, and bent to kiss her. "Thou didst well, no doubt, to bring the poor lad hither. But ere I let thee speak with him further, I must know whether his illness be

such that thou mightst take it, and moreover I must know what manner of lad is he."

Lady Sybil spoke with her own kind smile, but as she turned away Merrylips saw that a shadow of trouble was on her face.

A little dashed in spirits, though she could scarcely say why, she ran to Goody Trot for comfort. Up and down the many stairs of Larkland she sought in vain for the old woman, till at last, as a most unlikely place, she looked into her chamber. And there she found Goody Trot, all in a flutter, busied in sewing a tawdry necklace and three broad pieces into the covering of her bolster.

"Never do I look to see the light of morn!" cried the poor old soul, as soon as she saw Merrylips. "We's all be robbed of goods and gear and slain as well, with two murderous Spanish spies lying beneath our roof."

It was useless for Merrylips to say that Claus and Rupert were neither spies nor Spaniards.

They were foreign folk, were they not, Goody Trot asked. Go to, then! All foreigners were Spaniards, and had not the Spaniards, in her girlhood, sent a great fleet to conquer England? Now that there were rumors of war in the air, Goody Trot was sure that the Spaniards were coming again, and that Claus and Rupert were spies, sent before the general army.

It was almost as sad when Merrylips left the old woman and sought out Roger, the butler. She found him loading an old snaphance, over which he cocked his head wisely. These were troublous times, he hinted, and there were those not a thousand miles away who might be fain to see the inside of Larkland. Let them but try, and they should see more than they bargained on, he ended, with a grim chuckle, as he fondled his snaphance.

"But they are friends unto us, Rupert and Claus," cried Merrylips. "They are soldiers to the king whom we serve."

"And how know you that, mistress," asked the old man, "save by their own telling? And how know you that they tell the truth?"

In all her life Merrylips had never thought that any one could really lie. Wicked people did so, she had been told, but she had never dreamed that she herself should ever know such people. It hurt her now to believe that Rupert could have lied to her who had trusted him. Yet if he had not lied, Roger, her tried old friend, who called him false, was harsh and cruel.

It was a torn and tossed little heart that Merrylips carried to her godmother to be quieted, at the hour of twilight when they usually talked together.

"It is not true," she said stormily. "Oh, dear god-

mother, now that you have seen Rupert, you know it is not true — the evil things they all are saying of him."

"I know that he is ill and weary, poor lad!" said Lady Sybil, but when Merrylips would have protested further, she hushed her.

"Think not too harshly of thine old friends that they suspect this new friend thou hast made," she counselled. "Remember these are days when every man in this poor country doth suspect his fellow — when brother is arrayed against brother. We know not whence these two strangers come."

"Claus told me —" Merrylips began.

"Ay," said Lady Sybil, "he told thee somewhat, even as thou didst tell it unto me, but, child, when I questioned him, he unsaid much that he had said aforetime."

Then, touched by the little girl's sorrowful silence, Lady Sybil made haste to add: —

"It may be the poor soul was but confused and frightened. He seemeth none too ready of wit, and hath small skill in our language. In any case, my dear, time will show whether he be true man or false, and to time we'll leave the proof."

But at eight years old it is not easy to leave a small matter to time, let alone so great a matter as the proving of a dear new friend. Lady Sybil might go com-

fortably to her bed, but for Merrylips that night there was no rest. Between dozing and dreaming and waking to doze again, she thought about Rupert, her little soldier of the king.

So much to heart she took the charge of falseness that all the household made against him that she felt as if he must somehow know of that charge and suffer under it. She longed to do something to show him that she, at least, believed in him. Sleepily she wondered which one of her treasures she might give him by way of comfort. Should it be her dear whittle, or her best ball, or her own crossbow?

The light of the summer dawn was just breaking in the chamber when Merrylips sat up in her bed. She had been struck with a fine idea. She would give Rupert a cherry tart of her own baking. He would like a cherry tart, she knew. Any boy would! Besides, she must put herself to some pains to bake it, and she was glad to sacrifice herself for the sake of poor Rupert whom every one distrusted.

As soon as Merrylips had made up her mind, she began to wonder why she should not rise at once and go pluck the cherries for the tart. Then she decided that that would be a very wise thing to do, — indeed, that she ought to do it, and by such industry she should greatly please her godmother.

So up she got, at four o'clock in the morning, and dressed herself swiftly. She tied a little hood over her flyaway hair, and an apron round her waist to hold the cherries. Then she slipped out at the garden door, just as the cocks were crowing, and ran through the dewy grass to the great tree in the corner of the garden, where the duke cherries grew.

When once she was seated on high among the branches, Merrylips could look over the wall of the garden. On her right hand she saw the ox-house and the wain-house and the stable, all faintly gray in the morning light. Almost beneath her ran a footpath from these outbuildings. It skirted the garden wall until it reached the corner where stood the duke cherry tree, and there it led into the fields.

With her eyes Merrylips followed this path. It made a narrow thread of darkness among the grasses that were white with dew, until it was lost in a hazel copse. Beyond the copse the sun was rising, and the sky was flushed with a strong red that dazzled her eyes, so that she had to turn them away.

Just at that moment Merrylips heard a sound of cautious footsteps on the path below, and a hoarse exclamation. She looked down, but she was so dazzled that for a second she could not see clearly. Then on the path below she saw Rupert standing. She was

surprised, not only to see him there, but to see him alone, for she had thought that the voice that she had heard was not his, but Claus's.

Still, she could not stop to wonder about this, for here was Rupert, looking up at her with a piteous, startled face. She could not bear that for a single minute he should think her unfriendly, like the rest of the household.

"Good-morrow, Rupert!" she called gayly. "You're early afoot. Fie! So ill as you are, you should lie snug abed. My godmother will be vexed with you."

For a moment Rupert thrummed his battered cap and cast down his eyes.

"I stole forth. I was starved for a sup o' fresh air," he muttered. "But now — I will go back."

"Best so!" nodded Merrylips. "And oh, Rupert!" she leaned from her perch to add: "Ere noontime I'll have something rare to show you."

He looked up at her then, and blinked fast with his gray eyes. If he had been a younger boy, she would have said that he was almost crying.

So sorry did she feel for him that she was very near telling him about the cherry tart, but she checked herself, and tried another means of comfort.

"Rupert," said she, "would you like to see my cross-bow? Old Roger gave 't me, — ay, and I can hit the

white at twenty paces. Would it pleasure you to see it?"

"Will you go now to fetch it?" Rupert asked in a low voice.

Merrylips nodded, and tossed him a cluster of cherries.

"Do you wait me here," she bade, as she made ready to climb down from the tree. "You will await me, Rupert?"

He kept his eyes on the ground beneath the garden wall, — the little strip of ground that Merrylips could not see. After a moment he bowed his head, and then, as Merrylips swung herself downward from branch to branch, she lost sight of him.

In breathless haste Merrylips ran to her chamber. There she flung down the cherries, and bundled into her apron her crossbow and her ball and her top and all her other treasures.

Then out she posted, in the light that now was broadening, and ran through the garden gate into the path to the spot where she had left Rupert. She found footprints in the gravel, and under the wall the elder bushes were crushed as if a man had crouched there, but she found no other sign of human creature.

Sadly enough Merrylips trudged back to her chamber and put away the playthings that Rupert had not cared to see. She felt that she should have been angry

with him, if it were not that she was his only friend in Larkland and must be faithful to him. And perhaps, she tried to excuse him, he had been too ill to stay longer out-of-doors. She did not blame him for going back to his bed, and she would make him the cherry tart, just the same.

When the rest of the household rose for the day, Merrylips said no word of Rupert, for at heart she was still a little hurt. But she took the cherries in a pipkin and sat down to stone them on the shady bench by the garden door. She was thinking, as she did so, how all would be made right between her and Rupert, when she carried him the little tart. Perhaps he would even say that he was sorry that he had broken his promise to her.

Just then Mawkin came bustling to her side.

"Lackaday, mistress," cried Mawkin, "but you are lessoned fairly, and mayhap next time you'll hark to the words of them that be older and wiser than you, a-vexing her sweet Ladyship and a-setting the house by the ears, as you have done, with fetching in of graceless vagrom wretches, no whit better than they should be!"

"You have no right so to speak of Rupert!" cried Merrylips, hotly.

"And have I not?" Mawkin took her up. "Look you now, my lady her kind self hath just been unto the

ox-house to minister to that vile boy, and he and the man are both gone hence — stolen away like thieves under cover of night. Now what do you say unto that, Mistress Merrylips?"

CHAPTER VII

IN THE MIDST OF ALARUMS

INDEED, what could poor Merrylips say? Even she must admit that Rupert had deceived her.

At the very moment when he promised to wait for her, he had been stealing away from Larkland, like the spy that Goody Trot and Roger and Mawkin called him. No doubt he had Claus with him all the time, crouched in the bushes underneath the wall. No doubt he had let her fetch the crossbow only to get rid of her, that she might not see their flight. From first to last he had deceived her, and she had so trusted him!

It troubled Merrylips, too, in the hours that followed Rupert's flight, to feel that her godmother was troubled.

At first Lady Sybil seemed to make light of the matter. She said that no doubt the man Claus, in his stupidity, had been frightened by her questions and so had run away and taken the boy with him. She was sorry for the lad, who was so ill and so unfit to travel, and she sent out into the countryside to find him. But she could get no news of the runaways. No one seemed

to have seen or heard of them. And then Lady Sybil became grave and anxious indeed.

Little by little Merrylips stopped pitying Rupert, who might be lying sick under some hedge. Instead she began to wonder what harm might, through Rupert, come upon her dear godmother. She thought about this so much that she made her head ache. Indeed her head seemed strangely apt to ache in those days!

At last, one twilight, when Rupert had been gone four days from Larkland, Merrylips cast herself down on the cushion at her godmother's feet, and begged her to say just what was the evil that all the household seemed to fear.

"The silly serving-folk have filled thy little head with idle tales," said Lady Sybil, as if displeased; but then, as she looked into the piteous little face that was raised to hers, she changed her tone.

"Sweetheart," said she, "I have done ill to let thee be frightened with fancies, so now I will tell thee the mere truth. Thou art to be relied on, I know. Thou wilt keep all secret."

"As I am a gentleman," said Merrylips, soberly.

Then Lady Sybil told her that in the house of Larkland she kept hidden a great treasure of jewels that had been left her by her father, the Duke of Barrisden. She had told no one of this treasure, except old Roger,

who was most faithful; but she feared lest others of her servants might suspect its whereabouts, and for that she was troubled. For jewels, she explained, could quickly be turned into money, and money could furnish soldiers with horses and guns and powder. So there were many on both sides, now that war was coming in the land, who would be glad to have the spending of the Larkland treasure.

"But it is to the service of our king that I shall give my jewels," said Lady Sybil.

Merrylips drew a long breath and nodded her head. "Be sure!" she whispered.

Lady Sybil went on to explain that in that part of the country there were many people — Roundheads, as Merrylips had learned to call them — who were for the Parliament against the king. She was afraid lest these people should learn that her jewels were hidden at Larkland and come and seize them. On that account she was troubled at Rupert's and Claus's coming to the house and then fleeing away by night. She feared lest they had been sent by these Roundhead neighbors to spy upon her, in the hope of learning where she kept her treasure.

Not twenty-four hours later it seemed as if Lady Sybil's worst fears were to come true. About noon-time there sounded a sudden trampling of horses in the

courtyard, and a moment later a man strode into the room where Lady Sybil and Merrylips were at dinner. He was a tall, solid man with a close-set mouth and a square jaw, and the bow that he made before Lady Sybil was brisk and businesslike.

"'Tis a graceless matter I am come upon, your Ladyship," said he, "but 'tis better done by me, who am known to you, than by a stranger. I am come, on behalf of the Parliament, whose servant I am, to search your house for arms."

Merrylips waited to hear no more. She knew that crossbows were arms, and she loved her own crossbow. She flew up the stairs, and as she did so, caught a glimpse of rough men in the hall, who were tearing down the pikes and fowling-pieces from the wall, and heeding old Roger never a bit.

In her chamber she seized her dear crossbow and ran down again to the parlor, where she posted herself in front of Lady Sybil.

"The Roundheads shall not have my arms!" she said.

The square-jawed man looked at her then, and smiled. He was sitting much at his ease, with his elbow on the table and a cup of wine within reach of his hand.

"That's a chopping wench," said he. "A kinswoman to your Ladyship?"

"I AM COME, ON BEHALF OF THE PARLIAMENT, TO SEARCH YOUR HOUSE FOR ARMS."

"A daughter to Sir Thomas Venner," Lady Sybil answered, in her coldest and sweetest voice.

"Then, on my word, a kinswoman of mine own!" cried the man. "I am William Lowry, my lass, your third cousin by the distaff side. Come! Wilt thou not give me a cousinly kiss?"

Merrylips shook her head.

"I am kin to no Roundhead," she answered.

Mr. Lowry seemed not at all angry.

"Thy health, for a brisk little shrew!" he laughed. "I've a wife at home would be fain of a little daughter like unto thee."

Just then Mr. Lowry was called from the room by one of his followers. Indeed Merrylips saw no more of him till she looked from the parlor window, and saw him riding away at the head of his little band. They took with them all the pikes and muskets and snaphances, and even old rusted headpieces and cuirasses that were stored at Larkland, but that was all that they did take. Plainly, they had not guessed that precious jewels were hidden in the house.

"But they may come again," said Lady Sybil, gravely, when Merrylips asked her if all was not now well.

"And a second time," she went on, "the searchers may be ruder. I have no love to Will Lowry, 'tis true,

but he bore himself to-day as well as a man might do that hath in hand a hateful and a wicked work. Others might prove less courteous."

"He is an evil man and false," cried Merrylips. She found it easy to believe people false, since she had been so deceived in Rupert. "He said he was my mother's kinsman."

"And so he is, child," Lady Sybil answered. "He is a kinsman to thy mother, and to me also by marriage. He is a gentleman of good estate in the eastern part of the county, and he took to wife my cousin, Elizabeth Fernefould, a sister to the present Duke of Barrisden."

Now Merrylips had always thought of Lady Sybil's father as the duke. Indeed, she had never heard a word of the present Duke of Barrisden. So at the mention of his name she looked puzzled.

Then Lady Sybil, who had trusted Merrylips with much, trusted her with more. She told her that her father, the duke, had had no son, and so his title had gone to a distant cousin, and that he had been angered with her, and so had left much of his property to this same cousin. This man, who now was Duke of Barrisden, was a Puritan, as those were called who wished to make changes in the great Church of England. Like most Puritans, he was no friend to the king, and in all likelihood would fight against him in the coming struggle.

"For thou seest his brother-in-law, Will Lowry, hath already ranged himself on the side of the Parliament," said Lady Sybil. "He had not done so, without the duke's counsel. 'Tis a great nest of Roundhead gentry, here in our parts, and no friends to me."

That evening, as you may guess, there was no playing of hunt and hide in the corridors of Larkland, nor dancing in the little parlor. Instead Lady Sybil went hither and thither, and gave orders and sent off letters, while Merrylips, holding fast to her crossbow, trudged bravely at her heels. Next day Goody Trot, who since Will Lowry's coming was quite sure that the Spaniards were upon them, went away in a wagon to her daughter in the next village. The next day after that old Roger had the coach horses shod with extra care. Finally, on the third day, came a messenger, riding post, from the Duke of Barrisden, who brought an answer to the letter that Lady Sybil had sent him.

Lady Sybil read this letter, seated in her chamber, beside a chest where she was sorting garments. When she had read, she drew Merrylips to her, with a gayer face than she had shown since the morning of Rupert's flight.

"Methinks we shall yet be clear of this gin," said she. "Here's his Grace most courteously assureth me that no let nor hindrance will be put in my way, if I

wish to quit Larkland and go unto my friends who, even as myself, are Cavaliers — malignants, he is pleased to call them."

"Shall we go on a journey, then?" asked Merrylips. "That's brave!"

"Ay, brave indeed!" said Lady Sybil, and she flushed and smiled like a girl. "We'll go in the coach, thou, and I, and Mawkin, and Roger, and with us — lean closer, darling! — with us will go the jewels, snugly hidden in our garments. We'll guard them for the king."

"God save him!" whispered Merrylips.

"And at Winchester," Lady Sybil went on, "there'll be trusty men to meet us. I have written unto them. And whom dost thou think to see commanding them?"

Merrylips caught her breath.

"Not — not —" she faltered.

"Ay, thine own dear brother, Longkin. Thy father will send some of his troop to guard us, and they will take us — where thinkest thou?"

"Oh!" cried Merrylips. "To Walsover! To Walsover! Sweet godmother, we're going home at last to Walsover!"

CHAPTER VIII

THE SILVER RING

That night Merrylips hardly slept a wink. No doubt it was the thought of home that kept her wakeful, but she wondered why that thought should also make her head heavy and her throat dry.

As long as it was dark, she thought that when morning came she should have to tell her godmother that she was not feeling well. But when the day broke, she found so much to do that at first she forgot about herself. Later, when she remembered, thanks to the ache in her head, she was afraid that if she said a word about it, she should not be allowed to run to and fro and help her godmother, so she kept silent.

Indeed it was a busy day at Larkland, — so busy that Lady Sybil did not pay such close heed as usual to Merrylips, and so did not notice that she was not quite her brisk little self. There were boxes and bundles to pack for the journey upon the morrow. There were orders to give to the serving-folk about the care of the house. There were last visits to pay to good folk in Cuckstead village. Everything was done openly.

That was the surest way, Lady Sybil told Merrylips, to keep people from guessing that she had any other reason for taking this journey than that she wished to leave a neighborhood that she disliked.

Yet at one time it seemed as if the secret of the jewels must have got out. Early in the afternoon old Roger came with a whispered word of danger. From an upper window of the house he had spied a little band of horsemen riding from the east, and in the east lay the lands of the Duke of Barrisden, and Will Lowry, and their Roundhead neighbors.

The moments of waiting that followed were hard to bear. It seemed an endless time before Roger came again to Lady Sybil's chamber. But now he brought good news, for he told her that the horsemen had turned southward over Cuckstead common, toward the next village, which was called Rofield.

"No doubt they are gone thither to plunder the loyal folk of their arms, even as they did by me," said Lady Sybil. "Indeed, our going hence is timed not an hour too soon."

Then she dismissed Roger. She bade him keep a sharp watch, and meantime to tell the other servants that she was not to be disturbed. Against the long journey on the morrow, she and her young goddaughter would rest that afternoon in her chamber.

But it was anything but rest that Lady Sybil and Merrylips were to have that day. As soon as Roger had gone, Lady Sybil bolted the door, and closed the shutters, as if she wished to keep the light from the eyes of a sleeper. Then she pressed a spring in a panel of the wainscot, near the chimneypiece. Behold! the panel swung open like a door, and Merrylips looked into the secret chamber of Larkland, of which she had so often heard.

Out from the dingy little recess Lady Sybil brought caskets and coffers of odd shapes and sizes. Some were of leather. Some were wrought of metal. All these she opened, in the rays of dusty sunlight that came through the heart-shaped openings, high up in the shutters, and at sight of what they held, Merrylips cried out softly. She thought that all the jewels in the world must be gathered in that room. She looked on blood-red rubies, and great emeralds, and fire-bright topazes, and milky pearls, and flawless diamonds, and all were set in a richness of chased silver and fine gold.

"Oh, surely," breathed Merrylips, "with such wealth to aid him, our king will soon put down his enemies!"

At first she scarcely dared to touch the precious things, but soon she found herself handling them as if they were no more than bits of colored glass. For it was

her part to help Lady Sybil sew the jewels into the lining of the gowns and cloaks that they should wear upon the journey. Mighty proud Merrylips was that such a trust was placed in her, and glad, too, that she had learned to use a needle, so that she might be of service in such a need!

Hour after hour Merrylips sat at Lady Sybil's feet, in the darkened chamber, where the air was heavy with heat, and stitched and stitched. While the busy moments passed, the sunlight faded from the room. There came a rumbling of thunder in the sultry air, and then the beating of rain upon the roof.

It must be the thunder, thought Merrylips, that made her head ache. So languid did she feel that she was glad to lay her head against her godmother's knee. Thus she rested, and listened to the plash of rain, while through her half-closed eyelids she watched her godmother, with deft, white fingers, sew the last necklace into the bodice of her gown.

For a moment Merrylips must have dozed, but all at once she was awake again. She saw that her godmother had paused in her sewing, and wonderingly, she looked upon her. Then she saw that Lady Sybil sat with her eyes upon a ring that she had taken from the casket beside her — a ring wrought of dull old silver, in the shape of two hearts entwined.

"I've seen that ring ere now," said Merrylips, drowsily. "Godmother, when did I see that ring?"

Lady Sybil made no answer, and when Merrylips looked up into her face, she saw that there were tears in her eyes.

"I remember me," said Merrylips. "'Twas in the portrait that I saw it — the miniature of your fair sister, Lady Venetia. She wore that ring."

"Nay, not this ring, my darling, but its mate," Lady Sybil answered. "'Tis the crest of our house, of the Fernefoulds of Barrisden. The two rings were wrought for us, two sisters, and given us by our father. 'Twas the last token ever he gave unto us, while love was still amongst us three."

Merrylips took the ring from the fingers that yielded it, and caressed it with her hand and with her lips.

"Poor Lady Venetia!" she whispered. "And poor godmother!"

The storm had now passed over Larkland. On the roof the rain pattered softly, and from the garden rose the keen scent of drenched herbs. In the hush Lady Sybil's voice sank almost to a whisper.

"I said that one day thou shouldst hear her story — my poor, pretty sister! We were our father's only children, Venetia and I, and sorely he grudged that we should both be daughters. He was a stern man,

and wont to have his will in all things. He was fain to make great marriages for us, since he had no sons, but in that purpose he was thwarted. He who should have been my husband died a month before the wedding day. When thou art older, thou mayst understand.

"My father was angered for that I would not take another mate, and he vowed that he would bring his younger daughter to do his will. But she — my poor Venetia! — had given her heart already out of her keeping. His name was Edward Lucas, a gentleman of good birth and no fortune, who was master of horse in our father's household. When she found that our father would force her to a marriage with one whom she loathed, she did madly, yet I cannot think her all to blame. By stealth she was wedded to Edward Lucas, and with him she left the kingdom."

"And did you never see her more?" asked Merrylips.

She felt that she must not look upon her godmother's face, so she bent her eyes upon the ring. She had now slipped it upon her own finger.

"Nay, sweetheart," said Lady Sybil. "I never saw my sister again in this world. My father forbade me to go unto her, or even to receive her letters. I was ill and broken in those days. 'Twas then that my hair grew gray as thou dost see it. But by secret ways,

ofttimes through writings to thy father, who had been a friend to Ned Lucas, I had tidings of my sister.

"She went with her husband into the Low Countries, where he served in the army of the States General and proved himself an able soldier. Thence they went into far Germany, where great wars have raged these many weary years. Two children were born unto them, and taken from them, and then at last, in a great fever that swept through the camp, they died in one same week, my sister and her husband. And thou knowest now, sweetheart, the story of her who wore the ring that was mate to the one which thou dost fondle."

In the dim light Merrylips crept closer, and laid her cheek against her godmother's hand.

"Poor godmother!" she whispered. "I be right sorry."

"Dear little heart!" said Lady Sybil, and sat for a moment with her hand on Merrylips' cheek.

Then suddenly, as if she returned to herself, she exclaimed aloud: —

"Why, child, thy cheek is fever-hot. I have done ill to vex thee with sad tales, on a day of such alarums and with such a morrow before us. Now in very truth, I shall clap thee straightway into thy bed to rest against our journey."

Oddly enough, Merrylips felt no wish to cry out at such an order. So though it was not yet sunset she soon found herself tucked snugly into her own little bed, between sheets that smelled of lavender, and she found her godmother bending over her, to give her a good night kiss.

"Why, my Merrylips!" said Lady Sybil, in a voice that seemed to come from a drowsy distance. "If thou hast not here my ring upon thy finger! Let me bestow it safely."

But Merrylips, for once, was disobedient.

"Let me keep it by me!" she begged, in a fretful voice. "I'll not lose it. Only let me wear it till I come unto Walsover! Prithee, let me, dear godmother!"

All unlike her brave little self, Merrylips was fairly crying, and with those tears she won her way. When she fell at last into a restless and broken sleep, she still wore on her finger the silver ring that was the mate of the one that had belonged to poor, pretty Lady Venetia.

CHAPTER IX

ALL IN THE NIGHT

For a thousand years, it seemed to Merrylips, she had been climbing a hill. It was a long, long hill, and very steep, but at the top, she knew, was Walsover, and only by gaining the top could she reach home. So she climbed and she climbed, with the breath short in her throat and her body aching with weariness, but climb as she would, she was just as far as ever from the top.

She knew also — how, she could not say, — that she had no time to lose. She must reach the top of the hill very soon, or something dreadful would happen. Between weariness and fright she found herself sobbing, yet all the time she kept saying to herself: —

"'Tis a dream! 'Tis naught but a dream!"

Then she heard Mawkin's voice.

"Hasten, hasten, mistress!" Mawkin was saying. "Rise and don your clothes! Rise, else 'tis too late!"

"Oh, I be trying, Mawkin! Indeed, I try, but 'tis so far to climb!" Merrylips heard her own voice wail in answer.

She wondered why she troubled herself to answer, when it was nothing but a dream.

Before her eyes flashed a candle, as bright as if it were real. Round her she seemed to see the wainscotted walls of her little chamber, and the carved chair by the bedside, on which her clothes were laid. She seemed to see Mawkin bending over her, with her hair disordered and her eyes wild — so clear and lifelike had this dream become!

"'Tis the soldiers!" Mawkin was saying. "The loyal folk at Rofield have sent to warn us. The wicked Roundheads will be down on Larkland this same night. You must forth at once, little mistress, with no staying for coaches. You must go a-horseback, you and her Ladyship, and Roger to guard you. You must go, and without more staying. Waken, waken, little slug-abed, if you be fain to see Walsover!"

"I know! I know!" moaned Merrylips. "I've this long hill to climb."

Then, in her dream, she felt hands laid upon her.

"Quickly, quickly, you must don your clothes!" Mawkin was crying.

With all her strength Merrylips struggled against her and struck with her hands.

"Oh, thou art cruel," she sobbed, "so to hold me

back from this hill! Thou art cruel — cruel! Let me go, Mawkin! Let me go!"

She heard Mawkin crying and coaxing, and at last calling for help, but she heard her far off in the dream. Once more she was struggling up the long hill to Walsover, and the time, she knew, ran every moment shorter.

For one instant the dream was at a standstill. Heavy-headed and weak and sick, Merrylips found herself. She lay in her own bed, in her own chamber. On the table close by shone a candle, which made strange shadows on the wall, and through the casement she saw a thin moon riding down the sky. At the foot of the bed, stood Mawkin, and, just as she had done in the dream, she was wringing her hands and talking and crying.

But, not as it had been in the dream, Lady Sybil, in the green gown and the cloak into which, that afternoon, the jewels had been sewn, was bending over the bed. Her arms were round Merrylips, and her hand, on the little girl's forehead, felt cool and soft. It was the touch of her hand, thought Merrylips, that had ended the dream.

"Little one!" Lady Sybil was saying. "Thou dost know me, mine own lass?"

"Ay, godmother," Merrylips tried to answer, but could make no sound.

"Oh, your Ladyship!" Mawkin began to blubber. "She's fever-stricken, my poor, bonny lamb! She can never forth and ride with this sickness upon her. She must e'en bide here at Larkland. And when the soldiers come, haply they will —"

"Peace, thou silly fool!" Lady Sybil spoke sharply. "No harm will be done the child. And yet, ill as she is and in sore need of my care — oh, how can I leave thee, Merrylips? How can I leave thee?"

Upon her face Merrylips felt hot tear-drops fall. She thought that she must be dreaming again. It could not be her godmother who was weeping so!

Once more she had set her tired feet to the dream-hill that she must climb, when she heard a heavy step in the chamber. Beside the bed she saw old Roger stand. He wore a leathern coat, and at his side he bore a rusted old sword. She wondered where he had hidden it at the time when Will Lowry searched the house of Larkland.

"Your Ladyship!" said old Roger.

He spoke in the curt, soldierly fashion that must have been his when he was a young man and served against the Irish kern in Connaught.

"Your horses stand ready at the door," he went on. "Your enemies are yonder on Cuckstead common, not a mile away. An you will come, with that which you bear upon you, you must come now, or never!"

Merrylips lay with her head upon Lady Sybil's bosom, and she felt that bosom shaken with sobbing.

"Oh, Roger! My good Roger!" said a broken voice, which, Merrylips felt, could only in a dream be Lady Sybil's voice. "What shall I do? What can I do? This child — my little lass! She hath fallen ill. I cannot take her with me in my flight. Yet I cannot leave her."

Old Roger answered in a voice that rang through the dream.

"'Tis a sweet little lady and winsome, — ay, and dear unto mine old heart, your Ladyship! But the king's cause is dearer than any child unto us, who are your father's poor servants. Your Ladyship, 'tis to save your wealth for the good cause you go. 'Tis for the king you ride to-night!"

"The king!" whispered Merrylips. "God save him!"

"Hath not the child herself said it?" cried old Roger. "Come, your Ladyship!"

For one instant Merrylips felt on her forehead the touch of Lady Sybil's lips. For one instant she heard that dear voice in her ear.

"For the king, my little true heart — to bear him aid — only for that I leave thee! And oh! God keep thee, Merrylips, till I may come to thee again! God keep thee!"

But Merrylips heard the voice now, drowsily and far off. Far off, too, she heard the sound of footsteps hurrying from the room, and the sound of some one — was it Mawkin? — sobbing. Fainter, still farther off, she heard a ringing of horse-hoofs — a ringing sound that soon died away. She saw the slit of a moon and the candle at the bedside shrink till they were dim dreamlights.

Once again she was climbing the long hill that never had an end. But as she struggled on and on, with breath that failed and feet that were so tired, she told herself that it was all a dream, and nothing but a dream. The hill was a dream, and the terror that followed her a dream, and oh! most surely of all, it was a black and not-to-be-believed-in dream that Lady Sybil could have gone from Larkland and left her there alone.

CHAPTER X

PRISONER OF WAR

THE dream of the steep hill was only a dream. In time it ended, and Merrylips found herself, such a weak little shadow of a Merrylips, lying in her chamber at Larkland. Round her bed moved her own maid, Mawkin, and other people whom she did not know. There were strange serving-women, and a doctor dressed in black, and a tall, pale woman, with hands that were dry and cold.

Little by little Merrylips guessed that the other dream that had troubled her was no dream. By and by she got strength to ask questions, and then she found that it was indeed true that Lady Sybil had gone from Larkland and left her behind.

Mawkin told her the story one night when she watched at the bedside. She told how the Roundhead soldiers had been almost at the gates of Larkland; how, to save the jewels, which she dared trust to no other hand, Lady Sybil had fled on horseback; and how she had been obliged to leave Merrylips, who had that very night been stricken with fever.

"No doubt you took the sickness from that rascal boy whom you did bring to shelter here," said Mawkin. "As if that little vagabond had not brought trouble enough upon us without this! But in any case, you have been most grievous ill. Full three weeks you have lain in sick-bed, and we have all been in great fear for you."

At the moment Merrylips had strength only to wonder whom Mawkin meant by "all." She asked no questions then, but as the slow days passed, she came to know that Mistress Lowry, Will Lowry's wife and Lady Sybil's cousin, was living at Larkland.

Upon Lady Sybil's flight, Will Lowry had seized her house. He said that he had a right to it, because his wife was nearest of kin to Lady Sybil, and Lady Sybil had proved herself an enemy to the Parliament, by fleeing to the king's friends, and so had justly forfeited her house and lands. Doubtless Mr. Lowry would have found it hard to make good his claim to Larkland in the courts of law, but at such a time, when the country was plunging into civil war, the courts had little to say.

So Lowry's men and maids served in the house of Larkland. Lowry's steward gathered the harvests and collected the rents. And Lowry's wife, who was sickly and wished the air of the Sussex Weald, left her own

house by the sea and came to rule in Lady Sybil's place.

Of the old household only Mawkin and Merrylips were left. Mawkin was there because Merrylips needed her, and Merrylips was there because, at first, she was too sick to be moved, and because afterward — but afterward was some time in coming.

Meanwhile Merrylips grew slowly better and stronger. And every day, and more than once each day, Mistress Lowry, the tall, pale woman with the dry hands, was at her bedside. She brought possets and jellies to the little girl. She read to her from a brown book with clasps. She talked to her of what might have happened to her, if she had died in the fever, after the careless life that she had led. So gravely did she speak that Merrylips dared not go to sleep at night until she had a candle burning on the table beside her.

Once or twice, too, Will Lowry himself, with the close mouth and the square jaw, came into Merrylips' chamber, and patted her cheek and bade her get well.

"Ay, sir," promised Merrylips. "I shall soon be well, and then I shall go unto Walsover, shall I not?"

But to that Will Lowry answered that she must first get strong. It would be time enough then to talk of the long journey to Walsover.

So Merrylips got well as fast as she could. She did not doubt that Mistress Lowry meant to be kind, but she much preferred to be with her father and her brothers and her dear godmother at Walsover.

Again and again she begged for news of her family. All that Mawkin could tell her was that letters had come from Walsover. Mawkin did not know a word that was in them. Then Merrylips questioned Mistress Lowry, but she would tell her only that her kinsfolk all were well in body, though they were given over, heart and soul, to the service of a wicked king and a false religion.

When Merrylips heard her dear ones spoken of in this harsh fashion, she could not help crying, for she still was very weak. This crying and fretting and wondering as to when she should go home, did not help her to get well quickly. Indeed it was autumn, and her birthday once again, — her ninth birthday, — before she was able to fling crumbs to the carp in the fish-pond and walk in the little village, as she had used to do with Lady Sybil.

Then, one blowy October day, Mawkin came to Merrylips' chamber. Her face was all red with weeping, and she blubbered out that she had been dismissed from Mistress Lowry's service. The very next morning she was to be sent packing off to Walsover.

"Thou art going to Walsover?" cried Merrylips. "Why, what hast thou to weep on, thou silly Mawkin? Thou shouldst rather be smiling. Come, we'll make ready our mails against the journey."

As she spoke, Merrylips started to rise from the broad window-bench where she had been sitting. But Mawkin caught her in her arms, and hugged her, and poured out her story, weeping all the while.

"But I am to go alone, sweet little mistress! That wicked rebel Lowry and his sanctified wife are sending your poor Mawkin away, because she loveth you, mine own poppet, and would mind you of home, and they mean that you shall never go again unto Walsover, but stay here with them forever and ever, and forget your father and your mother!"

"But wherefore?" asked poor Merrylips, who was quite dazed at this news.

Many times, both on the day of Mawkin's sorrowful departure, and in the days that followed, Merrylips repeated that question. At the time she got no answer that she could understand. It was not till she was much older that she learned the reasons that had lain behind what might almost be called her captivity.

Out of policy Will Lowry had kept Merrylips at Larkland. He had brothers and nephews fighting for the Parliament in the west country, where Merrylips'

father was commanding a troop for the king. He believed that Sir Thomas was powerful enough to befriend these kinsmen, if they should be taken prisoners, and he believed that Sir Thomas would be more likely to do so, if Sir Thomas knew that his own little daughter was in the hands of the enemy. As a possible hostage, then, Will Lowry kept his masterful grasp on Merrylips.

For a different reason Mistress Lowry was not willing to let the little girl go. She had but one child, a son who was away at school, and, as Will Lowry had said, on the day when he seized the arms at Larkland, she wanted a little daughter. Now, like many other people, Mistress Lowry thought Merrylips a sweet child, and she wished her for her own, and so she calmly took her.

Stranger still, Mistress Lowry believed that she did a praiseworthy thing in keeping the little girl from her parents and her friends. She meant to bring Merrylips up in the straitest sect of the Puritans. With such a bringing up she thought that Merrylips would be better and happier than if she were bred among her own kindred, for, according to Mistress Lowry, they were careless and evil people. No doubt Mistress Lowry, in her own way, dearly loved Merrylips, but it was a selfish and a cruel way.

So Will Lowry, from policy, and Mistress Lowry, from what she called love, were both determined to keep Merrylips at Larkland. And when they were thus determined, who could stop them? There were no courts of law, with power over men of both parties, to make Roundhead Will Lowry give back to Cavalier Sir Thomas his stolen child.

Neither could Sir Thomas risk the lives of his soldiers by marching a hundred miles or so into the enemy's country and taking back his little daughter by force of arms. When Sir Thomas had written a couple of hot-tempered letters to Will Lowry, he had done all that he could do. Perhaps at times he even forgot about Merrylips. He was so busy fighting for the king that he had no time to think about a little girl who, after all, was in no danger of ill-treatment.

But all these things Merrylips knew only when she was older. At the time, in the dreary autumn of 1642, she could not understand why the Lowrys kept her at Larkland, nor why her own kindred let her stay there. But at least she knew that she did not at all like it at Larkland, so, as soon as she felt strong and well again, she started off, one damp November day, to make her way alone to Walsover.

She had her crossbow to keep off padders and Roundheads, and a big piece of gingerbread to eat on the way.

She took the silver ring, shaped like two hearts entwined, and hung it on a little cord about her neck, within her gown. She wished to have it with her for luck, because it was the last token that Lady Sybil had given her.

Thus she started off in the early morning, and at twilight she was found under a hedge, eight miles from home. She had eaten the gingerbread, and lost one shoe, and draggled her petticoat in the mud and wet. She was tired and half-frightened, but she still clung to her crossbow, and she lifted a brave little face to the searchers when they came upon her.

Will Lowry himself was at the head of the little band of serving-folk. He had come down from London, where he sat in Parliament, to see how matters were going at Larkland, and he did not seem much pleased at having to ride out and hunt for a naughty little runaway.

When once he had Merrylips seated on the saddle before him, he said sharply: —

"An thou wert a lad, I'd flog thee soundly for this."

"An I were a lad," said Merrylips, swallowing her tears, "you'd not flog me at all, for I'd 'a' been clear to Walsover by now."

She was quite sure that she should be flogged now, even though she was a girl. She was too tired and down-hearted to care.

But to her surprise, Will Lowry, instead of being more angry at her answer, laughed.

"A stout-hearted wench!" said he. "'Tis pity thou art not indeed a lad!"

Then Lowry unstrapped the cloak that was bound behind his saddle, and wrapped it about Merrylips, and brought her back to Larkland very tenderly. Better still, he would not let a word of reproof be spoken to her. The child was punished enough, he said, with the weariness and fright that she had suffered. He was kind, and Merrylips knew it.

But after that night, by order of this same kind Will Lowry, Merrylips was never allowed to set foot outside the garden, unless one of the servants was with her. So never again did she have a chance to run away to Walsover.

CHAPTER XI

THE COMING OF HERBERT LOWRY

THERE was no singing of carols nor eating of plum-pudding and mince pies at Larkland that Christmas, you may be sure. Mistress Lowry said that to keep Christmas was to bow the knee to Baal.

Merrylips did not know what that meant, though she thought it had a sinful sound. But at least she did know that on Christmas Day she had nothing better than stewed mutton for dinner, and she was given extra tasks that kept her busy till nightfall.

Indeed Merrylips had so many tasks, while she was under Mistress Lowry's care, that she looked back on her life at Walsover as one long holiday. She had to spin, and to knit, and to read aloud from dull books about predestination and election and other deep religious matters. Worst of all, she had to sit quietly for an hour each day and think about the sinful state of her heart and how she might amend it. If she had not been as sunny-tempered and brave a little soul as ever lived, she would surely have grown fretful and

morbid, shut up as she was with poor, sickly, fanatical Mistress Lowry.

Strangely enough, in those dull winter days, Merrylips was much comforted by Will Lowry, who came almost every week on a visit from London. He seemed to like her the better, because she had tried to run away.

Once he brought her from London a silken hood. At first he could not get her to wear it, because it was the gift of a rebel. But later, when Mistress Lowry took the silver ring away from Merrylips, saying that it was a vain, worldly gaud, he bade her give it back to the little girl. After that Merrylips was glad to please him by wearing the hood.

Will Lowry called her Merrylips, too, and that was a comfort, for Mistress Lowry and all the household called her Sybil, a name by which she scarcely knew herself. Better still, when he rode about the fields and farms that belonged to Larkland, he would often take her, boy-fashion, on the saddle before him, or when he walked in Cuckstead village, he would have her tramping at his side. He did not scold her for scrambling over walls and climbing trees. Instead he seemed pleased with her strength and fearlessness.

Once, when they had come in from a long walk in the chill winter weather, and were supping alone on bread and cheese, Lowry said, half playfully: —

"Merrylips, wouldst thou not like to have been born my little daughter?"

Merrylips shook her head sternly.

"I'm daddy's daughter," she said, "and I will be none other's."

"Thou canst not help thyself," Will Lowry answered. "One day thou'lt wed, and so become some other man's daughter."

Then he added, and whether he spoke in jest or earnest Merrylips was too young to know: —

"Upon my word, when thou art five years older, I'll wed thee to my boy Herbert, and so I'll have thee for a daughter in thine own despite."

At least Will Lowry was so much in earnest that from that day he stopped promising Merrylips that some time she should go home to Walsover. Also he began to talk to her of his boy Herbert. He was going to bring Herbert to Larkland soon, he said, and so give her a playfellow of her own years. And she must teach Herbert to play at ball and run and leap, and not to be afraid of a horse.

"Thou art a better lad than he in some regards," said Herbert's father, with what sounded like a sigh. "He is overfond of his book, but a good lad, none the less, and you two shall be dear friends."

Merrylips did not feel drawn toward Herbert by

this description, nor was she pleased at Lowry's hint that when she was older she should be Herbert's wife. Of course she knew that some day she should marry, and she knew that girls were often wives at fourteen. Still she did not wish to think of marriage yet, and especially of marriage with a boy who was overfond of his book.

But as the springtime passed, Merrylips grew so tired of Mistress Lowry's gloomy company that she began to think that it would be pleasant to have a boy of her own age to play with, even such a boy as Herbert. So she was more glad than sorry when Mistress Lowry told her, one bright day at Whitsuntide, that a sickness had broken out in Herbert's school, and next week Herbert would come home.

A little while after young Herbert came to Larkland. When he and Merrylips stood side by side, any grown person would have understood why poor Will Lowry wanted Merrylips for a daughter, and would have been a little sorry for him.

Herbert was frail and sickly like his mother. He was two years older than Merrylips, but hardly a fraction of an inch the taller. His hair was whity yellow, and lank, while hers was ruddy brown and curly. His eyes were pale blue, while hers were, like her hair, a ruddy brown. He drooped his head and shoulders.

She carried her chest and chin bravely uplifted and looked the world in the face.

Not only was Herbert sickly like his mother, but, as Merrylips soon found out, he was, like his mother, peevish and selfish. Besides, he was a coward. He would not even mount a horse, though his father, to shame him, set Merrylips on his own steady cob and let her trot up and down the courtyard. Worse still, once when his father caught him in a lie and struck him with a riding whip, Herbert whimpered aloud, so that Merrylips was ashamed for him.

But Herbert was not whipped a second time. His mother took his part, and said that he must not be beaten, for he was not strong. Then his mother and his father quarrelled, — so Merrylips heard it whispered among the serving-folk, — and Mistress Lowry took to her bed for a week, and Will Lowry went up to London in some temper.

After that Will Lowry came less often to Larkland. Perhaps it was because the Parliament in which he sat was very busy all that summer. Perhaps it was because he felt himself helpless to contend against his ailing wife. In any case, he stayed away from Larkland, and Merrylips, for one, missed him sorely.

Still, though Merrylips did not like Herbert, they were two children in a dull house full of grown folk,

so they were much together. When Herbert felt good-natured, he could tell long stories that he had read in books, about the wars of Greece and Rome and the pagan gods and goddesses. Sometimes he sang, too, in a reedy little voice, and he could make sketches with his pencil such as neither Flip nor Munn nor even Longkin could ever hope to make. At such times as these Merrylips was glad of his company and openly admired his cleverness.

But out-of-doors, at boyish sports, Herbert was worse than useless. He could not climb and run and ride and play as Merrylips did, and he was jealous because she could. He mocked at all she did, and said that, if he chose, he could do it far better, because he was a boy, and she but a paltry girl. He would not let her touch his bat and balls, and once, when he found her peeping into one of his Latin books, he ran and told his mother that she was meddling with his things.

Very soon Herbert found a better way to tease Merrylips than by laughing at her or bearing tales to his mother. Whenever he quarrelled with her, and that was often, he delighted to taunt her with the fact that she was a Cavalier. All Cavaliers, he said, were false and cowardly, and the brave and virtuous Parliament men were beating them soundly.

Here Herbert took an unfair advantage. From his parents he knew all that was happening in England, from the Roundhead standpoint. But poor Merrylips was not allowed to read for herself the letters that were sent her from Walsover and get the Cavalier side of the story. So she had no arguments with which to answer him.

One day in October Herbert told her joyfully that the king's army had been driven back from Gloucester and soundly beaten at a place called Newbury.

Merrylips could answer only that she didn't believe it.

Then he told her that the king had made peace with the murderous Irish, and that he was a false and wicked man.

At that Merrylips used the oldest argument in the world. She clenched her little fists, as she had not done since her eighth birthday, two full years before, and she gave Herbert a smack that sent him blubbering to his mother.

To be sure, Merrylips was well punished for that blow. Mistress Lowry whipped her hands, and prayed over her. Then she sent her supperless to her chamber, and bade her pray that her naughty spirit might be broken.

But Merrylips did not pray. Instead she curled up on the window-seat, and from within her gown took

the silver ring that Lady Sybil had left with her, and kissed it and stroked it and talked to it.

"I do think long to be at Walsover," she whispered. "But ere I go, I'd fain smack Herbert once again for a tittling talebearer. Ay, and I'd fain fight the wicked Roundheads, for Herbert and his mother be of their party, and O kind Lord! Thou knowest that they have used me much unhandsomely!"

And if, at that point, under cover of the twilight, a tear or two fell on the silver ring, even Merrylips' big brothers could scarcely have blamed that poor little captive maid.

CHAPTER XII

A VENNER TO THE RESCUE!

"SYBIL! Hey, Sybil! Why dost not answer when I speak thee fair?"

It was Herbert Lowry that spoke from the threshold of the hall, where Merrylips sat alone at her knitting. She raised her eyes from the tiresome stitches, and saw him standing there, and she thought to herself that never had she seen him look so well.

He was wearing breeches and doublet of reddish brown stuff, with gilt buttons, — a suit that pleased her best of all his clothes. In the autumn sunlight that slanted through the door, his hair was touched with yellow, and the color of his skin seemed almost healthy. He had spoken too in a friendly voice. It was clear that he was ready to make up, after the quarrel of two weeks ago in which she had struck him.

She was not sorry to be friends with him again. After all, she found Herbert better company than no company at all.

"Look 'ee, Sybil!" said Herbert, as he met her eyes.

He tiptoed into the hall, and held up before her a little creel and a long line.

"The cook-maid hath given me a dainty bit to eat, and I've here a brave new line. What sayst thou if we go angling for gudgeons to-day in the brook under Nutfold wood?"

Merrylips clapped her hands and forgave Herbert everything.

"A-fishing? Wilt take me, Herbert? I've not cast a line in a twelvemonth. Oh, wilt thou truly take me, Herbert?" she cried.

"Now hush!" he snapped. "'Tis like a silly girl to be squawking it out so all the house may hear. To be sure, I'll be gracious to take thee with me, Sybil, if thou'lt be good —"

"I will!" promised Merrylips, headlong.

"And do as I bid thee —"

"Yes, yes!" cried Merrylips. "Let us be gone!"

Deep in her heart she mistrusted that Herbert had planned this trip without telling his mother. She doubted if Mistress Lowry would let her ramble off the three miles to Nutfold with no better guard than this young boy. So she was much afraid lest she should be called back and forbidden to go a-fishing. She fairly tiptoed out of the house at Herbert's side, and never drew a long breath till she heard the garden gate close behind them.

The two children were now quite sure of not being

seen and stopped. But none the less Herbert, who was sly by nature, picked their path in the shelter of walls and hedges and through copses. In this stealthy way they went westward toward the wood that lay by the hamlet of Nutfold. Herbert was empty-handed. He bade Merrylips carry the creel in which their luncheon was packed, and true to her word, she did his bidding.

When they reached the brook Herbert said:—

"Now thou mayst dig for worms, Sybil, while I cut me a fish-rod."

Well, well! She had promised to do as he asked, and a gentleman must keep his word, so she took a stick and grubbed in the dirt for bait, while Master Herbert sat at his ease and trimmed an alder branch with his knife. As she worked, she wondered if she had not been foolish to come with Herbert. She should be punished, surely, for running away and leaving her knitting undone. And meanwhile she was not having at all a good time.

As the morning passed, Merrylips found less and less pleasure in the sport to which she had looked forward. Again and again Herbert bade her bait his hook for him, and he made her carry the creel, but not once did he let her cast the line.

It was his line, he said, when she timidly asked to

have it only for one throw. It was his line, and he should use it, and in any case she could not catch a fish. She was but a girl.

"I'd not need to be a skilled angler to do better than thou," answered Merrylips. "Thou hast not taken a fish this morning."

"'Tis because thou hast frighted them away with thy clitter-clatter," scolded Herbert. "A fool I was to let thee come with me!"

Almost at an open quarrel, they stumbled through the tangled sedges and trailing underwood upon the bank of the stream. The tireder Herbert grew, the crosser he was, and the worse luck he had with his fishing — and he had very bad luck! — the surer he was that Merrylips was to blame.

Soon he began to mock and to tease her, and once, when she tripped over a fallen branch, he laughed outright.

"You may laugh," cried Merrylips, "but haply you'd not find it easy to keep your feet, if you bore a great basket, and if you wore hateful petticoats a-dangling round your feet. I would that you had to wear petticoats but once!"

"Thou'rt weeping now!" jeered Herbert.

Merrylips made herself laugh in his face.

"'Tis only silly boys that weep," said she. "When

their fathers beat them, they snivel, and run with tales to their mothers."

The quarrel had begun in earnest. For the next half mile the tired children tramped in angry silence. Then Herbert snatched the creel from Merrylips.

"'Tis mine!" he said.

He sat down on a grassy bank and opened the creel. Within it were spice cakes and cheese and a little chicken pasty, and every crumb that greedy boy munched down himself, and never offered so much as one spice cake to Merrylips.

Perhaps he hoped that she would ask for a share of the luncheon, but in that case he was disappointed. Merrylips was hungry indeed, after the long walk in the autumn air, but she would have starved before she would have begged of Herbert.

She went a little way off, but only a little way, for she could not help hoping that he might offer her some of the food. She sat down on the edge of the brook and flung clods of dirt into the water. She sang, too, because she wished Herbert to think that she did not care at all, but out of the corner of her eye she watched the chicken pasty and the cheese and the spice cakes till the last crumb was gone.

Then Merrylips lay down and drank from the brook, for she saw that a drink of water was all the luncheon

that she was to have. As she leaned over the brook, the silver ring that hung about her neck slipped from the bosom of her gown and swung at the end of the cord on which she wore it.

"What's that?" said Herbert.

He too had come to the edge of the brook to drink, and he stood near Merrylips.

"Let me look upon it, Sybil."

"Go finish your dinner!" Merrylips answered as she put the ring back within her gown.

Her tone angered Herbert even more than her words.

"You show me that as I bid you!" he cried. "How dare you disobey me? You're going to be my wife some day — father saith so — and then I'll learn you! Now you show me that silver thing, mistress, or I'll beat you!"

"Try it!" flashed Merrylips.

But for all her brave words, she did not wish to fight with Herbert. She felt too tired and hungry to fight, and besides, if she beat Herbert, she knew that she should be punished for it by Mistress Lowry. So when Herbert put out his hand to seize her, she dodged him and took to her heels through the wood. She knew that she could outrun him.

She heard him crashing among the bushes behind her. She felt the sting of the bare branches that

whipped her face as she ran. Blindly she sped along till right at her feet she saw the ground open where a sunken bridle-path ran between steep banks. Far off on the path she heard, as something that did not concern her, like a sound in a dream, a muffled padding of horse-hoofs.

Panting and spent, she jumped down the bank into the path, and as she did so, she caught her skirt on a prickly bush of holly. She was brought to her knees by the sudden jerk, and before she could free her skirt and rise she felt Herbert's grasp close on her arm.

"You jade! I'll learn you now!" Herbert cried.

All the time she had heard the horse-hoofs, nearer and nearer, and she heard now a deep voice.

"Lord 'a' mercy! Ye little fools!" the voice said. "Will ye be ridden down?"

Horses, two horses, that looked to Merrylips as tall as steeples, were halted right above her. In the saddle of one a big man in a steel cap and a leathern coat sat gaping. From the saddle of the other there had vaulted down a slim young fellow in a shiny cuirass, with a plumed hat on his head and a sword slung from his baldric. He caught Herbert by the neck.

"Learn her, wilt thou?" he cried in a clear, youthful voice. "Faith, here's a schooling in which I'll bear a hand, my pretty gentleman!"

"FAITH, HERE'S A SCHOOLING IN WHICH I'LL BEAR A HAND, MY PRETTY GENTLEMAN !"

There was something in the voice, something in the figure, that brought to Merrylips the sight of Walsover, and the sound of voices that she had not heard in two long years. She scrambled to her feet, and with a loud cry flung her arms about the young man.

"'Tis thou! 'Tis thou!" she cried. "'Tis thou at last, and I did not know thee! Oh, Munn! mine own dear brother!"

CHAPTER XIII

IN BORROWED PLUMES

At first Merrylips could only laugh and cry and repeat her brother's name, while all the time she clung tight to him. It seemed too good to be true that Munn had really come at last! If once she let go of him, she feared that he would vanish, as the shapes of her dear ones had so many times vanished in her homesick dreams.

Little by little she grew sure that the figures on which she looked were real. The horses that drooped their heads to crop the brown grass were real. The big trooper, who held their bridles with one hand, was real, and in his face, which was all one broad grin, she recognized the features of that same Stephen Plasket, the serving-man who had gone with her when she went walking in London. From him she turned to Herbert Lowry, who stood scared and shaking, with his arm in Stephen's grasp, and she found him so real that she knew this was no dream.

Then she looked up again, at the sunburnt young face under the plumed hat, that bent above her. She

was certain now that it was indeed Munn, in flesh and blood. So she kept back the tears of which he would not approve.

"And what's the news from Walsover?" she begged, as soon as she could speak. "Oh, tell me how it is with daddy and with my godmother!"

Very hastily Munn told her all that she wished to know. First he told how Lady Sybil had come safe to Walsover with her jewels, which had long since been spent in the king's service. After that Lady Sybil had gone a long journey into France, to beg some of the great folk in those parts, whom she had known in her girlhood, to send aid to the cause she served. For a time also she had been in the king's camp at Oxford, but now she had come back to Walsover.

Then he went on to tell how Lady Venner and Puss and Pug were full of cares, for Walsover had been fortified and garrisoned. Besides, many cousins and kinsfolk had come there for shelter, so the great house was full to overflowing.

Of more interest to Merrylips, he said that their father, Sir Thomas, was in command of a troop of horse, with headquarters at Walsover. Longkin, who was now a tall gallant with mustaches, was a lieutenant under him, and Flip hoped soon to be an officer. But at present Flip was thought too young to hold

a commission, and so he had to stay, much against his will, and mind his book at Walsover.

For his own part, Munn ended, he had got him a cornetcy in the horse-troop of Lord Eversfield, the father of one of his schoolfellows. Just now he was serving under one Captain Norris, at a fortified house called Monksfield, in the rape of Arundel.

While Munn was speaking, he kept glancing up and down the bridle-path, and when Merrylips noticed this, she cut him short.

"Leave the rest!" she said. "Thou'lt have time enough to tell it me on our way. And now let us be off quickly, lest we be stayed."

At that Herbert lifted his voice.

"Don't you dare to go with these vile knaves!" he shrilled. "My mother will be angered. Don't you dare!"

Merrylips laughed and turned her back on him. Then she saw that Munn stood biting his lip, with his eyes upon the ground, and she stopped laughing.

"Munn!" she gasped. "But surely thou art come to fetch me? Thou wilt never think to go and leave me here behind?"

With a gesture that she remembered, Munn took off his hat and ran his fingers through his hair.

"Look 'ee, Merrylips," said he, "I was i' the wrong,

belike, to come hither at all. 'Twas that I was sent from Monksfield with others of our troop to gather cattle and provender for our garrison. We seized this morn upon the village of Storringham, a league or so to the west of here. And Lieutenant Crashaw who commandeth our party bade me ride forward with a trusty man, to spy out the country. And so I shaped our course toward Larkland, on the chance that I might see thee, honey, or get news of thee, for I was fain to know how thou wert faring."

"Yes, yes!" said Merrylips. "But now that thou hast found me, Munn, dear, what shall hinder me to go away with thee?"

Munn shook his head.

"How can I take thee, Merrylips? I tell thee, I am in garrison, in a house where no women dwell, among men ruder than any thou hast ever dreamed on, or should dream on, little maid. Our captain indeed hath straitly charged us to bring thither no women of our kindred, nor young children. For the life in garrison is rough and hard, and more, we are in daily peril of assault from our enemies. Thou seest well, thou canst not come with me. Thou must be content to stay at Larkland, where thou art safe from danger."

"But I do not fear danger!" cried Merrylips, flinging back her head.

Then once more she clung to Munn, and begged and pleaded as never before in her little life.

"Oh, Munn! Sweetest brother! Thou canst not have the heart to leave me, when I have waited long. And 'tis so hateful at Larkland, with Mistress Lowry ever chiding and lessoning me, and Mr. Lowry, he cometh almost never among us now. And they say that daddy and thou and Longkin are evil men, and that I must hate the king —"

"Say they so?" growled Stephen, the trooper. "Quiet, ye rebel imp!"

As he said that, he shook Herbert, though Herbert had not so much as stirred.

"And," Merrylips hurried on, "they say when I am older, I must wed Herbert Lowry yonder."

Then it was Munn's turn to break into words.

"Now renounce my soul!" he cried, and flushed to the hair, and then grew white under his coat of tan. "So that's Will Lowry's bent — to mate my sister with his ill-conditioned brat! Upon my conscience, Merrylips, I be half minded —"

She held her breath, waiting to hear him bid her scramble on his horse's back. But after a moment he shook his head.

"Nay, it must not be," he said sadly. "Monksfield is no place to which to bring a girl child. Ah, Merrylips, if thou wert but a young boy!"

Merrylips clenched her hands. She was fairly trembling with a great idea that had come to her. When she tried to speak, she almost stammered.

"Munn! Dearest Munn! Why should I not go as a boy — as thy little brother? Oh, I'll bear me like a boy! I'll never cry nor fret nor be weary. Oh, do but try me, Munn! Best brother! Sweetest brother! Let me go with thee as a little boy!"

"Thou lookest a boy," said Munn, and tried to smile, as he pointed at her petticoat. "What of clothes?"

"Faith, sir," cried Stephen, "if the little mistress be stayed for naught but a doublet and a pair of breeches, here they be, ready to hand!"

As he spoke, the trooper began to unfasten Herbert's ruddy brown doublet, and at that Herbert screamed: —

"Do thou but wait! 'Tis thou shalt pay for this, Sybil Venner, when my mother cometh to hear on it!"

"Be quiet!" bade Munn, in a stern voice. "And you, Stephen Plasket, hold your hand. Let me think!"

He stood in the bridle-path, with his brows knit and his lips stiffened, while he tried to see his way clear, this young officer, who himself was after all no more than a boy. He knew that Monksfield was no place for Merrylips. He knew that he would disobey his captain's orders, if he should take a little girl thither.

Yet he dreaded to leave her behind at Larkland. Not

only did he hate to disappoint her so cruelly, but he was angry at the mere hint of her being brought up to make Herbert Lowry a wife. Besides he was afraid, hearing Herbert's outcry, that if she were left behind, she might be punished only for thinking to escape.

In short, Munn felt that he could not leave his sister at Larkland. But at the same time he knew that he could not take her, as a girl, to Monksfield.

In this dilemma he began to turn over her childish proposal that she should go with him disguised as a boy. He felt almost sure that he should be allowed to bring a young lad into the garrison for a few days. Within those few days he hoped to find means to send Merrylips on to Walsover, before any one could discover that she was no boy, but a little girl.

He knew that this was a risky undertaking, and he knew that the burden of it would fall upon the child, but he thought that he could trust her. He noted how straight and vigorous was her slim young figure, how brown and healthy her color, how brave her carriage. She had always been a boyish little girl, and in her boyishness he now placed his hope.

From Merrylips Munn turned to that pallid and ill-favored Herbert, who was squirming in Stephen's grip. Suddenly all that in Munn which was still a schoolboy thought it a rare jest to put Herbert into petti-

coats, where he belonged, and set brave little Merrylips, for once, in the breeches that all her life she had longed to wear. So good a jest it was, that he thought, for the jest's sake, he might win forgiveness even from his captain, if he should be found out.

Carried away by the fun of it, he turned to Merrylips, and his eyes were dancing.

"Run thou behind yonder thick holly bush," he spoke the words that bound him to this plan. "Off with thy gown and fling it forth to me. Thou shalt speedily have other gear to replace it."

Before he had done speaking, Merrylips was screened behind the holly bush, and with fingers that shook was casting off her bodice and her petticoat. As she did so, she heard an angry cry from Herbert.

"I'll tell my mother! I'll tell my —"

There the cry changed, and from the sounds that went with it she knew that at last Herbert was getting, from Stephen Plasket, the whipping that for months he had so sorely needed.

A moment later a little ruddy brown bundle came tumbling over the holly bush, and Merrylips, in all haste, turned herself into a boy. She kept her own worsted stockings and stout country-made shoes. Over her own plain little smock she drew the ruddy

brown breeches, which she gartered trimly at the knee, and the ruddy brown doublet, with the slashed sleeves and the pretty buttons of gilt. She unbound the lace that tied her hair and shook her flyaway mop about her face. Her hair was so curly that it had never grown long enough to fall below her shoulders, and that was a very fit length for a little Cavalier. She tied Herbert's white collar round her neck. Last of all she set Herbert's felt hat upon her head, and then she was ready.

But she did not feel at all as she had thought she should feel. Instead of feeling bold and manly, she was suddenly afraid lest, in spite of the clothes, she should not be boy enough to please Munn. So great was her fear that she stood shrinking behind the holly bush till she heard Munn call, a little impatiently. Then she crept out, with her head hanging.

Munn looked at her, and gave a whistle between his teeth — a whistle of dismay. He had thought her a boyish little girl, but he saw her now a very girlish little boy. He doubted if, when they came to Monksfield, he could keep up for one moment the deception that he had planned. But come what might, he knew that he had now gone too far to draw back. After the rough way in which he had let Master Herbert be used, he dared not leave his little sister in the hands of Herbert's kin.

"Into the saddle with thee!" he bade more cheerily than he felt.

He had to help Merrylips to his horse's back. When he had vaulted into the saddle behind her and put his arm about her, he felt that she was quivering with excitement and nervousness. He called himself a fool to have ventured on such a hare-brained prank.

But just then Stephen, who all this time had held Herbert silent with a hand upon his mouth, let go of him in order that he might mount his horse. And straightway up jumped Herbert, right by Munn's stirrup, half in and half out of Merrylips' gown, with his face all smeared with tears.

"Oh, thou Sybil Venner!" he wailed. "I'll tell my mother! I'll —"

Then Merrylips threw back her head and laughed, with the color bright in her cheeks once more.

"See how thou dost like it thyself to walk in petticoats!" she cried. "Go tell thy mother — tell her what thou wilt. Thou canst tell her I'm off to the wars to fight for the king."

"Well said!" laughed Munn, as he gathered up the reins. "Upon my word, I believe that after all thou'lt do thy part fairly, Merrylips, my little new brother!"

CHAPTER XIV

OFF TO THE WARS

As they rode along the way to Storringham, Munn gave Merrylips good advice.

"Look to it thou dost not swagger nor seek to play the man," he checked some fine schemes that she had hinted at.

"Be just as thou art, and let them think thee a timid little lad, and one that hath been reared among women. I'll say thou art not overstrong, and under that pretext will keep thee close, for the most part, in mine own chamber, till I find means to send thee unto Walsover. Ay, ay! We may win through in safety. For Stephen, I know, will be faithful and hold his tongue."

"Trust me for that, sir," cried the ex-serving-man, who rode close behind. "I'll never betray the little mistress — the little master, I should say."

Presently Munn spoke again, telling Merrylips what people she would meet at Monksfield, and how she should bear herself toward them.

"Our senior captain," said he, "that commandeth our garrison, is called Tibbott Norris. He is a soldier

of fortune — that is, he hath been a soldier all his life for hire in foreign armies. He is a harsh, stern man, and one of whom many folk stand in fear, and with reason. So do thou be civil to him and keep thyself out of his path."

This Merrylips promised to do, most earnestly. She was a little frightened at the mere thought of this Captain Norris, of whom her big brother Munn seemed himself to be afraid. She found his very name fearful.

"Tibbott!" she repeated. "I never heard of any one that was called Tibbott."

"Why, no doubt he was christened Theobald," said Munn. "That is quite a common name, whereof Tibbott is a byname."

But Merrylips still thought Tibbott an odd name, so odd that she said it over to herself a number of times.

"Of our other officers," Munn went on, "the junior captain is called George Brooke. He loveth a jest and may well try to tease thee, but do not fear him. Neither do thou be too saucy and familiar, for he is shrewd and may guess that thou art not what thou dost seem. Miles Digby is his lieutenant, a rough companion and apt to bully, but I'll see to it that he try not his tricks with thee. And Brooke's cornet is one Nick Slanning, somewhat a braggart, but a good heart and will do thee no harm. That's our officers' mess at

Monksfield, save for Eustace Crashaw, Captain Norris's lieutenant, and him thou soon shalt see, for we now are drawing nigh unto Storringham."

In the last moments they had left the shelter of the wood, through which Munn had prudently shaped their course. They now were riding over some low, bare hillocks. As they reached the top of one that was higher than the rest, they saw, right below them, a clump of trees, and rising through the branches were a shingled church spire and a number of thatched roofs. Over all, trees and spire and roofs, hung a murky film which thickened at the centre to a black smear.

"My life on't!" cried Munn. "Lieutenant Crashaw hath been smoking these pestilent rebels."

So saying, Munn put spurs to his horse, and at a round trot they swung down the hill into Storringham. Then they found that the smoke which they had seen came from a great pile of corn that had been heaped in the open space before the church, where four roads met, and set afire. Near by stood three great wains, heaped high with corn, and hitched each to six horses. Farther along, herded in one of the narrow roads, a drove of frightened cattle were plunging and tossing their heads.

Everywhere there were dismounted troopers. They herded the cattle, with loud shouts and curses. They

piled corn upon the wains. They went at will in and out of the cottages, the doors of which stood open. Oftenest of all they went in and out of the largest cottage, which seemed a tavern, and when they came out, they were wiping their mouths on their sleeves.

In the midst of this hurly-burly, where men hurried to and fro, and cattle plunged, and horses stamped, and dogs barked, a little group of people stood sadly by the smouldering heap of wasted corn. They were village folk, Merrylips saw at once.

Most of them were women, and of these some wrung their hands and wept, and some cried out and railed at the troopers. Almost all had young children clinging to them. There were not many men among them, and these were mostly old, white-headed gaffers in smock frocks. But one or two were lusty young fellows. Of these one had his arm bandaged, and another sat nursing his broken head in his two hands.

Now when Merrylips looked at these unhappy people, she was much surprised. She had thought that Storringham, which the gallant Cavaliers had taken, would be a strong fort with walls, and that the people in it would be fierce and wicked Roundheads. But now she saw that Storringham was like Cuckstead, and the Storringham folk were like the Cuckstead folk who were her friends, and she was sorry for them.

"How did it chance that all their corn was burned?" she asked her brother.

"Faith," said Munn, quite carelessly, "Lieutenant Crashaw bade bring all the corn hither, and then, it seemeth, he must have bidden waste what we could not bear away for our own use."

Merrylips turned where she sat before him, and looked up into his face.

"But, Munn," she said, "what will they do when winter cometh, and they have no corn to make them bread?"

"Why, little limber-tongue," Munn answered, "that concerneth us not at all. These folk are all rebels, and they fired upon us when we rode into their village this morn. So we have punished them, as thou seest. 'Tis the way of war, child."

At that word Merrylips remembered how in her heart she had longed for war. But she had thought that war was all gallant fighting and brave deeds. She had never dreamed that it meant wasting poor folk's food and making women cry.

By this time Munn had pulled up before the tavern, and now there came across the open space and halted by his stirrup a fair-haired gentleman, with a drooping mustache and a scrap of beard.

"W-what news?" said he, speaking with a little stammer.

Munn saluted him and told him that he had seen no sign of the enemy to eastward. So respectfully did he speak that Merrylips judged, quite rightly, that the fair-haired gentleman was Munn's superior officer, Lieutenant Crashaw.

When Munn had done speaking, the lieutenant looked at Merrylips, and said, with a smile: —

"W-what! Have you b-been child-stealing, C-Cornet Venner?"

Then Munn stiffened himself, holding Merrylips tight, for he knew that the minute of trial had come.

"This is my young brother," he said slowly. "He hath been reared among Puritan kinsfolk and kept from us by the fortunes of war. This day I chanced upon him —"

"Ch-chanced, eh?" said Crashaw, and his smile deepened, so that Munn grew red.

"Well, well!" Crashaw went on, "you d-did wisely to snatch this b-bantling out of rebel hands. Fetch him along, and we'll m-make a m-man of him — if Captain Norris l-let him live to grow up! Now l-let him down and stretch his l-legs, for we'll not m-march hence for an hour."

Merrylips found herself lifted to the ground, where she stood looking about her. She was not quite sure

what she should do. She would have chosen to stick close to Munn's heels, but she feared that would not be like a boy. So she stood where she was left, and anxiously watched Munn, as he went a little aside and spoke with Lieutenant Crashaw.

While the two young men were talking together, a little girl ran out from the group of village folk and halted before them. She was about Merrylips' own age, with a shock of tawny hair and chapped little hands. Her gown was old and patched. She wore no stockings, and her little apron, which she kept twisting between her hands, was all soiled with dirt.

"Kind gentlemen," she said, in a scared voice, "will ye not be good to give back our cow — the spotted one yonder with the crumpled horn. For there's Granny, and Popkin, and Hodge, and Polly, and me, and we've naught but the cush-cow to keep us — sweet gentlemen!"

"R-run away with thee, little rebel!" said Crashaw, not unkindly, but much as he would have spoken to a little dog that was troublesome.

And Merrylips' own brother Munn, that was so good to her, said carelessly: —

"If you'll believe these folk, every cow in the herd is the only maintenance of seven souls at least."

The little girl turned away, with her grimy apron

twisted tight in her hands, and so sorry for her did Merrylips feel that she started after her.

"Little maid!" she said, and fumbled in her pocket.

In that pocket, when she had changed into Herbert's clothes, she had remembered to put her own whittle and three half-pence that Mr. Lowry had given her. She pulled out the half-pence now, and said she:—

"Prithee, take these, and I would they were more, and I be main sorry for thy cush-cow."

But the little girl with the tawny hair turned upon her like a little fury.

"I do hate thee for one of 'em!" she cried. "I'd fain see thee dead, thou wicked boy!"

As she spoke, smack! she struck Merrylips a sounding blow right across the face.

"Hey! Hey!" said Lieutenant Crashaw, laughing. "C-close with her, young Venner! Strike for the k-king!"

Merrylips blinked and swallowed hard, for the blow had not been a light one.

"I am — a gentleman," she answered jerkily. "I may not strike — a girl."

She turned away and sat down on a bench by the tavern door. Presently she picked up a bit of stick and marked with it in the dirt at her feet.

In this fashion she was busied, when she heard a

step beside her. She looked up, and found the lieutenant standing over her. She saw, too, that Munn was gone, and Stephen with him, and she felt afraid, but she tried not to show it.

"So thou art too good a g-gentleman to strike a g-girl, eh?" said Lieutenant Crashaw.

Merrylips stood up civilly when he spoke.

"Ay, sir," she said, and looked him full in the face.

"And too young a g-gentleman yet to k-kiss a girl, I take it?" the lieutenant laughed, and then he looked sober and half-ashamed.

"Thou hast r-ridden far," he said, in a kind voice. "Art hungry, b-belike?"

Then he called in at the open window of the tavern, and speedily a flurried serving-man came out. In his hands he brought a great piece of bread, on which a slice of beef was laid, and a hunch of cheese, and a pot of beer, which he placed on the bench by Merrylips.

"'Tis g-good trooping fare," said Crashaw. "D-down with it, my gallant, and till thy b-brother cometh again, I'll have an eye to thee."

So Merrylips sat down, and in spite of the bustle round her and the anxiety which she felt at finding herself without Munn in this strange place, she made a hearty meal, for indeed she was hungry.

While she ate, she saw a squadron of the troopers mount on horseback and set the herd of cattle in motion. Soon horses and cattle and men had all disappeared in a cloud of dust. Next the wains full of corn were started from the village. Then, at last, when Merrylips had long since eaten her luncheon and had kicked her heels for a weary while, Munn Venner, on a fresh horse, came clattering through the village and reined up before the tavern.

Munn leaped from the saddle, and ran to speak to the lieutenant. What he said, Merrylips had no way of knowing, but she saw Lieutenant Crashaw turn to his trumpeter, who stood near. The trumpeter blew a blast that echoed through the village, and speedily troopers began to straggle in from cottages and lanes and rick-yards and get to horse.

Then Munn beckoned to Merrylips, and she ran to him, and waited for his orders.

"Were it not best, sir," Munn said to the lieutenant, "that this little one be placed in the van?"

"Munn!" whispered Merrylips. "Am I not to ride with thee?"

"Hush!" he bade. "I shall be in the rear of the troop, where my place is. There is no danger," he added hastily, "but 'tis better thou shouldst be in the front of our squadron. Have no fear! With

Lieutenant Crashaw's good leave, I'll give thee into the care of a trooper I can trust."

The lieutenant nodded, as he turned away to give some orders, and Munn raised his voice: —

"Hinkel! Come hither!"

At that word a burly, thick-set man, who had been bent down, tightening a saddle-girth, at the farther side of the way, came hurrying across to Munn and stood at salute.

"Take this lad, my brother," bade Munn, "and bear him on your horse, and see to it, Hinkel, that you bring him safely unto Monksfield."

"Ja, mein Herr!" said Hinkel.

At the sound of that guttural voice Merrylips gave a little cry. Looking up, she looked into a low-browed face that she remembered. In the trooper Hinkel she saw the same man that months before at Larkland she had known as the runaway Claus.

CHAPTER XV

TIDINGS AT MONKSFIELD

So Merrylips was perched on the saddle in front of Claus Hinkel. And for the first half mile that she rode, she wondered what would happen to her, now that she was left in the care of the man whom she so distrusted.

For the next half mile she had a new fear. What if Claus should recognize her as the little maid that he had seen at Larkland, and tell every one that she was no boy? But she must have been wholly changed by eighteen months of time and the boy's dress. Though she held her breath and waited to hear Claus tell her secret, hers and Munn's, he said not a word.

By this time Merrylips and Claus had worked their way through the mass of men with whom they had left Storringham. They had now caught up with the vanguard, which had marched out of the village an hour before them. With the van went the creaking wains and the herd of cattle. Over all hung a cloud of dust that shone in the light of the setting sun.

Soon the sun had sunk in a red smear of cloud behind the hills to westward. Over the brown fields that

lay on either hand the twilight fell. In the hollows and where the road wound beneath trees it was quite dark. Merrylips could see the men and horses round her only as dim shapes in the blackness. But all the time she could hear the padding of hoofs on the road, the jingle of bits, the squeak of stirrup leathers, and the heavy breathing of horses and of men.

From time to time, too, she heard sharp orders from Lieutenant Crashaw, who rode at the head of the troop, and low mutterings that passed from man to man. They were moving slowly, because of the darkness and because of the cattle and the wains, which could not be hurried. She felt that all were uneasy at this slowness, and then she herself became uneasy.

After what seemed a long, long time the moon broke through the clouds and flung black shadows on the road. They moved a little faster now. Presently they passed through a straggling village that lay along a brook. No lights were burning in the cottages, and many of the doors stood open to the night wind. From the talk of the men about her Merrylips guessed that the Cavaliers had served this village as they had served Storringham, later in the morning, and that in fear of their return the village folk had stolen away.

In all the length of the village they heard no sound, except the dreary howling of a dog, far off in the dark-

ness. They saw no human creature, until they came to a little bridge, by which they must cross the stream. There, on the parapet, a lean man in fluttering rags sprang up and mowed and gibbered at them.

"Hey! Go bet!" he cried, in a shrill voice that showed that his mind was empty. "Whip and spur! Whip and spur! Hatcher of Horsham will learn ye better speed. Ride, ride, ye robbers! Ye'll never outride Hatcher and his men."

One of the troopers that rode near to Merrylips swung his carabine to his shoulder. For the first time in her life she heard a shot fired in anger. She bit her lip not to scream. But the crazy man was not hurt. He leaped from the parapet, and before another shot could be fired was out of sight among the shadows of the bushes that grew along the brookside.

Lieutenant Crashaw came pushing to the spot and soundly rated the man that had fired. Then he turned his horse to the rear, and trotted away down the moonlit road.

From that time Merrylips could not help glancing over her shoulder every now and then. She wondered what might be happening in the rear. And with all her heart she wished that Munn were at her side, or even Stephen Plasket.

They had left the village well behind them, but they

still were following the road along the brook. Then, above the creak of the wains and the clatter of the horses' feet, Merrylips heard a sound that made her think of the beat of heavy hailstones on the leaded panes at Larkland.

"Hark 'ee!" said Claus to the trooper beside him.

"Ay," said the latter.

He turned in the saddle to listen. All the while the spatter of the hailstones sounded through the night.

"The fat's i' the fire now," said the trooper. "'Tis yonder at Loxford village, and a pestilence place for an ambuscado!"

The corporal who was left in charge of the squadron came riding then along their line, with sharp orders. Promptly the men fell silent. They closed their ranks, and with little rustlings and clickings looked to their primings and loosened their swords in their scabbards.

Still the hailstones spattered in their rear. Merrylips knew now that she was listening to the crack of carabines. Through all her body she began to tremble.

The rest of that strange night she remembered dimly. They rode on and on, in a tense silence. They flogged forward the wain-horses and the cattle, and some of them they had to leave behind. They met a great body of horsemen who were friends, sent out to help them. They came to a vast pile of buildings, set

apart in a field, where there was a sheet of water that gleamed dully in the moonlight. They rode through an arched gateway, past sentries, into a big courtyard, where torches were flaring. Merrylips knew then that at last they had come in safety to Monksfield.

She felt herself lifted from the saddle, and stood upon a bench against a stable wall.

"Stay ye there, master," she heard Claus say. "Cornet Venner will speedily be here."

For a weary while Merrylips stood there, and watched the crowd. The courtyard was choked with frightened cattle and horses, and men that tried to clear the press, and officers that shouted orders. But she seemed to be unnoticed by them all.

She was very tired with riding all day long. She was frightened, too, at the strangeness of the place in which she stood, and troubled at Munn's not coming. If she had not promised her brother to be brave, she felt that she should have cried.

From time to time she shut her eyes. She was so tired! Once, as she did so, she reeled and almost fell off the bench. Then she grew afraid that she might fall and be trampled on by the cattle, so she left the bench and crept into a shed that stood close by. There she sat down on a truss of straw to wait for Munn. When he did not come, she thought it no harm

to lie down. She could wait for him just as well lying down as sitting, and she was very tired.

It might have been minutes later, or hours later, when Merrylips woke up. It still was night, and the torches were burning, but the courtyard now was cleared of cattle. She sat up in the straw, and at first she scarcely knew where she was, or how she came there, or anything, except that she was lame and tired and cold.

Then she saw, standing over her, a man who must have wakened her. She rubbed her eyes and looked again, and now she saw that it was Lieutenant Crashaw. He wore his doublet bound about his neck by the two sleeves, and his left hand rested bandaged in a sling.

For a moment she stared at him, and wondered, for she had not remembered him like that. Then she came to herself.

"Where's Munn?" she asked. "Where's my brother?"

"My l-lad," said Crashaw, gravely, "thy b-brother is not here, nor will be here for l-long."

Then, while Merrylips stared speechless into his haggard face and seemed to see it far off, Crashaw went on: —

"The Roundheads from Horsham — C-Colonel Hatcher and a troop of dragoons — set upon our rear

at L-Loxford village. And one of our troopers, Plasket, had his h-horse shot under him. And thy b-brother like a g-gallant fool, reined up to take the f-fellow up behind him. And so the rebels c-closed with him. And so, my l-lad, we had to leave thy b-brother and the trooper, Plasket, p-prisoners in the hands of the enemy."

CHAPTER XVI

BROTHER OFFICERS

When Merrylips next woke, she wondered for a minute where she was. Then she remembered last night. She remembered how Lieutenant Crashaw had led her across the courtyard, and through dim halls and passages, and up a narrow stair. She remembered how he had opened the door of a little chamber and had said: —

"This is thy b-brother's quarters. Thou canst l-lie here for now."

So it was Munn's own room in which she woke. Munn's coats hung on the wall, and on the table, beneath the window, were paper and ink and two bitten apples. Munn must have sat there, writing and eating, before he started on the march from which he had not come back.

At the thought of her lost brother, Merrylips hid her face in the pillow. She was sorry for Munn, who was left a prisoner in the hands of the cruel Roundheads. And she was sorry for herself, too, and sorely afraid of what might happen to her. For if it had seemed hard

to be a boy at Monksfield, when Munn was to be there to help her, what did it not seem, now that he was taken from her and she was left to play her part alone?

Still, she never dreamed of telling any one, not even friendly Lieutenant Crashaw, that she was a little girl. She had promised Munn to bear herself as a boy, as long as she stayed at Monksfield. And a gentleman must keep his promise, whatever might happen.

So presently, as a little boy, she should have to meet those brother officers that Munn had told her about. She thought of Captain George Brooke, who would tease, and Lieutenant Miles Digby, who was apt to bully, and Captain Tibbott Norris, from whose path she had been warned to keep herself. She felt that she should never, never have the courage to show her face among them.

But as the morning passed, poor Merrylips grew hungry. And she doubted if there was any one in Monksfield who would bring dinner to a lazy little boy that stayed in bed.

So she got up, and brushed her hair, and smoothed her doublet and breeches, which she had sadly rumpled in her sleep. Then she took from the wall an old red sash and tied it round her waist in a huge bow. It was an officer's sash, and Munn's sash, too. Somehow she felt braver when she had it on.

Like a little soldier and Munn's brother, she marched out of the room and down the stairs into a flagged corridor. Right before her she saw a door that was ajar, and in the room beyond she heard a murmur of men's voices. She shrank back, but just then she smelled the savor of bakemeat. And indeed she was very hungry!

So she sidled through the crack of the door, like a very timid little boy. She found herself in a rude old hall, which was paved with stone and very damp, in spite of the great fire that blazed upon the hearth. Against the wall were benches, and in the middle of the room was an oaken table on which dinner was set out — a chine of beef, and a bakemeat, and leathern jacks full of beer.

Round the table, on forms and stools, were seated five men, who all wore the red sashes of Cavalier officers. At the sound of Merrylips' step on the echoing floor, they looked up, every one of them. In her alarm, she came near dropping them a courtesy like a girl.

"Yonder's l-little Venner, whereof I told you, sir," spoke a voice that Merrylips remembered for Lieutenant Crashaw's.

Then a harsh voice that she did not remember struck in: —

"Come you hither, sirrah!"

A long, long way it seemed to Merrylips she went. She crossed the floor that echoed in a startling manner. She passed the faces that were bent upon her. At last she halted at the head of the table.

The man who sat there was dark, and ill-shaven, and bearded, and his hair was touched with gray. His leathern coat was worn and stained, and his great boots were muddied. Yet Merrylips did not doubt that he was commander in that place. This was the man whom even her big brother feared — the dreaded Captain Tibbott Norris.

For a moment Captain Norris looked at Merrylips, and she looked bravely back at him, for all that she breathed a little faster.

"So you're Venner's brother!" he said at last. "Well, an you grow to be as gallant a lad as Venner, your kinsmen need find no fault in you."

When Merrylips heard Captain Norris, whom Munn had feared, praise him so generously, now that he was gone, she wanted to cry. But she blinked fast and said, with only a little quaver: —

"I thank you — for my brother's sake, sir!"

Captain Norris noticed the struggle that she made. Into his sombre eyes there came a spark of interest.

"How do they call ye, lad?" he asked.

Before she had thought, out popped her own name.

"Merrylips, an't like you, sir."

She heard a chuckle go round the table. She did not realize that Merrylips was a nickname that might be given to a boy as well as to a girl. So she did not dream that the officers were laughing at a little boy who told his pet-name to strangers. Instead she thought that she had told her secret and that they knew her for a girl. At that she was so frightened that she hardly knew what she did.

Captain Norris broke out impatiently: —

"No, no, ye little bufflehead! I asked your given name."

In her fright Merrylips could think of but one name, among all the boys' names in the world. That was the one that had so taken her fancy the day before. She knew that she must not say it. But while she was thinking how dreadful it would be if she did say it, she let it slip off her tongue: —

"Tibbott, sir."

Then indeed she knew that Captain Norris would be angry at her for taking his name. She would have run away, if she had not been too scared to move.

Strangely enough, Captain Norris did not seem angry. He stared at her for a moment. Then he gave a sort of laugh, which the men around him echoed. Indeed, to them it seemed droll, that such a scrap of

a lad should bear the very name that Captain Norris had made feared through all the countryside.

"My namesake, are you?" said Captain Norris.

He laid a hand on Merrylips' shoulder, but not unkindly, and drew her to him.

"Sit you down, sir," he bade, "and do me the honor to dine with me, Master Tibbott."

So Merrylips sat beside Captain Norris, on the form at the head of the table, and ate her share of the bake-meat, like a soldier and a gentleman. She meant to be as still as a mouse, for she bore in mind all Munn's warnings. But when she was spoken to, she had to answer, and she was spoken to a great deal.

For those tall officers were very tired of doing and saying the same thing, day after day. They were as pleased with this round-eyed, sober little boy as Merrylips herself would have been with a new plaything. They chaffed her and asked her foolish questions, only to make her talk.

Captain George Brooke, who was tall, with shrewd eyes, asked her if she hoped to win a commission before Christmastide. Nick Slanning, who was hardly older than Merrylips' brother Longkin, wished to know how many rebels she thought she could kill in a day. And when dinner was eaten and the men were lighting their pipes, Miles Digby urged her to take tobacco with him.

Merrylips drew back, a little frightened, but there Captain Norris struck in.

"Let the child be," he ordered sternly. "He's over-young for such jesting, Digby."

For the first time in hours Merrylips smiled. She moved a little nearer to Captain Norris. Indeed, she would have much liked to say to him, "Thank you!"

But just at that moment the door was pushed open, and a boy came into the mess-room. He did not come timidly, as Merrylips had come. He clanged across the floor, swaggering like a trooper, with his head up. He wore a sleeveless leathern coat, as if he were a truly soldier.

At first Merrylips was so envious of that coat that she did not look at the boy's face. But when he halted at Captain Brooke's side and swung his hand to his forehead in salute, she looked up. Then she saw that he was a handsome boy, brown-haired and gray-eyed, and she knew him for Rupert, Claus Hinkel's little comrade in the far-off times at Larkland.

Now Merrylips might have guessed that if Claus were at Monksfield, Rupert would be there too. But she had not thought about it at all, so now she was taken aback at the sight of him.

She heard Rupert say something to Captain Brooke about what the farrier said of a horse that was sick.

She did not much heed the words. Indeed, Rupert himself seemed to make them only an excuse for coming to the mess-room. He lingered, when he had done his errand, as if he waited to be spoken to. But the officers all were busy talking to Merrylips.

They scarcely noticed Rupert till they all rose from table. Then Captain Brooke said: —

"Here, young Venner! Yonder's a playfellow of your own years. Go you with Rupert Hinkel."

So Merrylips was dismissed, with a clap on the shoulder. And presently she found herself outside the house, in a little walled space that once had been a garden.

There she stood and looked at Rupert, and Rupert looked at her. His cheeks were red, and his level brows were knit. She knew that she disliked and feared him, because he had run away from Larkland. And she felt that he disliked her twice as much, but she could not guess why.

"Shall we sit and tell riddles?" drawled Rupert. "Thou art overyoung for me to take thee where the horses are. Thou shouldst not be in garrison, but at home wi' thy mother."

"Thou art not thyself so wonderful old," Merrylips answered hotly.

Rupert laughed.

"Thy sash is knotted unhandily," he said. "Let me put it aright. Thou hast tied it like a girl."

At that word Merrylips grew red and frightened.

"Do not thou touch it!" she cried. "It liketh me as it is."

She spoke so angrily, in her fright, that Rupert grew angry too.

"In any case," he said, "thou hast no right to wear that sash. Thou art no officer."

"Then," said Merrylips, "thou hast no right to wear that soldier's coat. Thou art thyself but a young lad and no soldier."

Surely, there would have been a bitter quarrel, then and there, but just at that moment Slanning and Lieutenant Crashaw sauntered into the garden.

"Hola, young Venner!" Slanning sang out.

"Go to thy friends!" Rupert said, in a low voice. "They'll use thee fairly. I care not, I! 'Tis only little boys like thou are fain to be made much of."

Then Rupert marched away, very stiffly, and Merrylips stood wondering what it was all about. But while she was wondering, Slanning and Crashaw came to the spot where she stood. They set to playing a fine game that Merrylips' brothers had often played at Walsover, a game in which they pitched horseshoes over a crowbar that was driven into the ground some twenty

paces away. And part of the time they let Merrylips play too.

So friendly were they all three together that at last Merrylips ventured to ask a question.

"If it like you, Cornet Slanning, may I not wear this sash, even though I be not an officer?"

"Who saith thou art not?" Slanning answered.

Merrylips shook her head. Though she thought Rupert a rude lad, she could not bear tales of him.

"I — I did but wonder," she stammered.

"W-wonder no more!" bade Crashaw. "To be sure, thou art an officer — the youngest one at M-Monksfield, and b-brave as the best, eh, Tibbott?"

"I'll try, sir!" Merrylips answered, and saluted him, just as Rupert had saluted Captain Brooke.

And she did not see why those new brother officers of hers should have laughed aloud!

CHAPTER XVII

"WHO CAN SING AND WON'T SING —"

As soon as Merrylips found that her secret was safe and that she seemed to every one a little boy, she enjoyed her days at Monksfield very much. Indeed, she would have been more than human, if she had not been pleased with all the notice that she won. She was the only child in a garrison of men, and from the horseboys in the stables to the officers in the mess-room, she was petted by all.

The saddlers made her more leathern hand-balls than she could ever use. The smiths let her tug at the wheezy bellows in their sooty forge. The horseboys set her on the bare-backed horses when they led them to water. Even the cross men-cooks in the fiery kitchen made her sometimes little pasties for herself alone.

As for the troopers, they were all her friends. They let her help them, when they cleaned their bright swords or scoured their carabines. They told her endless stories of battles and sieges and of wicked Roundheads that dined on little babies. So terrible were these stories that Merrylips quite shook in her

shoes to hear them, yet she could not help asking for more.

Best of all, the officers, whom she had so feared, were almost as kind as if they had been her own big brothers. They laughed at her and chaffed her, to be sure, as a little boy who had been reared too long among women, but on the whole, they all, even rough Miles Digby, were very gentle with her.

Sometimes Merrylips wondered why they were so kind. But it was not until she was much older that she realized that she owed some thanks to Captain Tibbott Norris. By some strange impulse that big, harsh man was moved toward the bit of a lad that bore his own name of Tibbott, and silently he stood his friend.

It was Captain Norris that gave Merrylips her brother's room for her very own. It was Captain Norris that promised to send her, by the first safe convoy, to her kinsfolk at Walsover. Above all, it was Captain Norris that from the very first made all his followers, both officers and men, understand that little Tibbott Venner was under his special care. After that it would have been a very bold man that would have harmed little Tibbott by word or deed.

So Merrylips passed her days at Monksfield, safe and unafraid. Indeed she would have been quite

happy, if she had not had two causes for grief that never let her be.

The first was, of course, the loss of her brother Munn. At night, when she lay in his bed, she would think of all the stories that she had heard from the troopers of the cruel way in which the Roundheads used their prisoners. Then she would seem to see her brother, haggard and pale and hungry, shivering half-clad in some dismal prison, and perhaps even struck and abused by his jailers. Often, when she called up that sorrowful picture, she would have cried, if she had not promised Munn that she would bear herself as became a boy.

The second trouble, not so deep as the loss of Munn, but always present, was the unfriendliness that Rupert showed her. He seemed the only soul in the Monksfield garrison that disliked her, and all the time she was so eager to be friends with him!

At the outset, to be sure, Merrylips had been shy of Claus and Rupert, for she remembered how her godmother had suspected them for spies. But when she found that Claus was trusted as a good soldier by all the officers, who were her friends, she dared to think that her godmother perhaps had been mistaken.

So now there was nothing to keep her from being Rupert's playfellow, as she had planned to be, long

ago at Larkland. At least, there was nothing except their squabble on her first day at Monksfield. And that she was ready to forgive and forget.

She tried to show Rupert that she was willing to meet him halfway, if he wished to make up. She put herself into his path, but he only scowled at her and so passed by. She hung about, smiling and trying to catch his eye, but he would not even look at her. She could not guess why he should hate her so.

But one day she heard a horseboy jeer at Rupert.

"Thou mayst carry thy crest lower now, young Hinkel," the horseboy laughed. "Thou art level wi' the rest of us, my lad, now that some one else is white-boy, yonder 'mongst the gentry coves."

Very slowly Merrylips began to see what she had done to Rupert. From a word here and a sentence there she gathered that before she came to Monksfield he had been by several years the youngest lad in the garrison, and, as such, a favorite with the officers. They had had him into the mess-room to sing for them, when they were idle, and had laughed and jested with him as a towardly lad. But now that she was there, a younger child and a newer plaything, Rupert was forgotten by his patrons.

When Merrylips found that she had taken Rupert's place, she remembered how she herself had felt when

Herbert Lowry came to Larkland, where for such a long time she had been the only child. With all her heart she was sorry for Rupert, and she wondered how she could make up to him for the wrong that innocently she had done him.

While Merrylips was wondering, something happened so dreadful that she feared it could never be put right.

Late one afternoon she was trudging across the great court at Lieutenant Digby's side. She was good friends with Lieutenant Digby, for all that Munn had thought him apt to bully. He had been teaching her to handle a quarter-staff, and had given her some hard knocks, too. But a little boy must not mind hard knocks! Merrylips quite swaggered at the lieutenant's side, and as she went whistled — or thought that she whistled! — most boyishly.

But, to her surprise, the lieutenant cried: —

"Name o' Heaven, what tune is it thou dost so mangle, lad? Is it *The Buff-coat hath no Fellow* thou dost hit at? Yonder's a knave can sing it like a blackbird, and shall put thee right."

Then, before Merrylips had guessed what he meant to do, he shouted: —

"Rupert! Ay, thou, young Hinkel! Come hither!"

Rupert was at the well in the middle of the courtyard, where he was drawing a bucket of water for the cooks.

He must have heard the lieutenant, for he looked up; but when he saw that Merrylips was with him, he dropped his eyes and did not stir.

Then Lieutenant Digby called a second time, and now his face was stern. So Rupert came unwillingly. He slouched across the court, coatless, with his sleeves turned up, and halted by the porch where the lieutenant and Merrylips were standing.

"Quicken thy steps next time," said Lieutenant Digby, "else they'll be quickened for thee. And now thou'rt here, off with these sullens and sing *The Buff-coat* for Master Venner."

Rupert's straight brows met in a scowl.

"I winna sing for him," he said.

As he spoke, Rupert caught his breath. Suddenly Merrylips realized that over against the big lieutenant he was but a little, helpless boy, scarcely older than herself. She knew how shamed she should have been, if she had been made to sing for Herbert Lowry's pleasure. She felt her face burn with pity for Rupert and anger at Lieutenant Digby.

"I do not wish it!" she cried. "He shall not sing the song for me, I tell you!"

But Lieutenant Digby did not heed her in the least. While she was still speaking, he took Rupert by the neck and struck him a sounding buffet.

"Thou wilt not, eh?" he said. "Then we'll find means to make thee."

Merrylips gave one glance at the lieutenant's set face. Then she took to her heels and never stopped running till she had shut the door behind her in Munn's chamber. She knew that Lieutenant Digby meant to beat Rupert till he was willing to sing the song for her, as he was bidden. But perhaps, if she were not there, he would give over his purpose. And if not — oh! in any case she could not bear to stay and see Rupert hurt.

For some time Merrylips waited in the chamber, while she wondered what was happening in the court below. She was standing by the window, which looked into an orchard, and beyond the orchard was a great rampart of earth that had been flung up to defend the house from attack upon that side.

As Merrylips looked out, she saw Rupert steal across the orchard and clamber up this rampart. For a moment she hesitated. Then she mustered courage. She slipped down the stairs, ran out of the house, and followed him.

She found him seated on the top of the rampart. He was resting his chin in his two hands, and he had fixed his gaze on the open country that spread away below him in the gathering twilight. He would not look round, even at her step.

"Rupert," she faltered, as she halted beside him. "I — I am right sorry."

"Get thee away!" he answered between his teeth. "I'm a gentleman's son, I, as well as thou. I'll not buffoon for thee — not for all Miles Digby can do!"

He looked up at her, and tried to speak stoutly, but his face was quivering.

"Get thee hence!" he cried again, and turned away his head. "I'll not be made a gazing-stock, I tell thee! Get thee away, Tibbott Venner, thou little milksop! Truth, I do hate the very sight of thee!"

So Merrylips clambered sadly down the rampart in the twilight, and after that put herself no more in Rupert's way. But she thought of him often, and whenever she thought of him, she was sorry for him, and sorry for herself, as if she had lost a friend.

CHAPTER XVIII

TO ARMS!

For two weeks and more Merrylips had lived at Monksfield. In a hole in her mattress she had hidden the silver ring that had been Lady Sybil's. As long as she had been a girl, she had worn the ring about her neck, but she felt that it did not become a boy to wear it so.

She had changed her girlish little smock for one of Munn's loose shirts. Over her ruddy brown doublet she wore a sleeveless jerkin of leather, which had been made for her from an old coat of Munn's. In her sash she carried a pistol with a broken lock that Nick Slanning had given her.

And she had learned to cock her hat like Lieutenant Crashaw, and stride like Captain Norris, and say, "Body a' truth!" loud and fierce, like Lieutenant Digby. In short, she felt that she now was truly a boy, such as all her life she had hoped to be. And she was willing to stay and be a boy, there at Monksfield, forever and ever.

But there came a day when Merrylips found that things were different. At dinner she sat unnoticed by her friends, the officers, while they talked of beeves and sacks of corn and kegs of powder. Before the meal was over Lieutenant Crashaw left the mess-room, and Captain George Brooke did not come to table at all.

When Merrylips went among her friends, the troopers, she found them busy with their arms. They bade her run away, or else told her the grimmest stories that they yet had told about the cruelties of the wicked Roundheads. Still, she did not quite catch what was in the air, until she came upon Rupert. She found him sitting on a bench against the stable wall. He had his sleeves turned up, and between his lips he held a straw, just as a grown man would have held a pipe, and he was cleaning an old carabine.

At Merrylips' step Rupert looked up, and for the first time in days spoke to her of his own accord.

"Look 'ee, Master Venner," said he, "thou wert best be at home wi' thy mammy. The Roundheads will be down upon us, and they be three yards tall, every man of 'em, and for the most part make their dinners off babes such as thou."

Merrylips felt her cheeks grow hot.

"I've lived two years amongst the Roundheads,"

she said, "and I know such tales be lies, and thou art a Jack fool to believe 'em."

"Wait and see!" laughed Rupert, and then, as if he were glad of any one to listen to him, he held up the carabine.

"This is *my* gun," he said proudly, "and I shall be fighting with it at Claus Hinkel's side. I've a powder flask, and a touch-box, and a bullet pouch, and a piece of match as long as thine arm."

"Pooh!" sniffed Merrylips, though indeed she was bitterly jealous. "*I* have a pistol."

"With a broken lock," jeered Rupert. "To be sure, they'd not trust thee with a gun — a little lad like thou."

"Do thou but wait and see what I shall have!" cried Merrylips, hotly.

"Ay, we shall see!" said Rupert.

Then Merrylips walked away, with a stride that was like Captain Norris's. At that moment she quite hated Rupert, and she did not believe his story that the Roundheads were coming to attack Monksfield. She was sure that he had said it only in the hope of frightening her. But before the day was over, she found that Rupert had spoken the truth.

Late in that same afternoon Merrylips was playing with her ball in a little paved court at the north side of the great house. In the old days, a hundred years

before, Monksfield had been a monastery, and many of the ancient buildings, with their quaint flagged court-yards, still were standing. At one side of the court where Merrylips played was a wall with a locked gate that led into what had been the herb garden, and on this garden abutted the still-house that the old monks had used.

Presently in her play, Merrylips cast her ball clear over this wall. She did not wish to lose her toy, so she fetched a form from the wash-house, close by, and set it on end against the wall. By climbing upon it, she was able to scramble over into the garden.

She landed in a pathway of sloping flags, along which she guessed that the ball must have rolled. So she followed the path till it pitched down a sunken stair-way which led to an oaken door beneath the still-house. At the foot of the stairs lay the ball, and she had just bent to pick it up, when the door opened, right upon her, and a man stepped out.

At her first glance Merrylips saw only that he was a rough fellow, in a smock frock and frieze breeches, and coarse brogues, and that he wore a patch upon one eye. So little did she like his looks that she turned to run up the steps, faster than she had come down, but just then she heard her name spoken: —

"Tibbott Venner!"

The voice was one that she knew. She halted and looked again, and this time, under the black patch and the walnut juice with which the man's face was stained, she recognized the features of Captain George Brooke.

"What bringeth you hither?" Captain Brooke asked sternly, and took her by both shoulders, as she stood a step or two above him on the stairway.

In answer Merrylips held out the ball.

"Tibbott," said the captain then, less sternly but still in a grave voice, "you can keep a secret, can you not? Then remember, lad, you are never to tell to any one in Monksfield that you saw me come from the still-house cellar, nor that you saw me in this garb. Promise me!"

Merrylips shook her head. She feared that she should anger Captain Brooke, and she was sorry, for she liked him, but still she said: —

"I cannot promise. I must tell Captain Norris all that I have seen."

"Now on my word!" said Captain Brooke. "Do you think me about some mischief, Tibbott — a traitor plotting to betray the garrison, perchance? Come, then, and tell all unto Captain Norris, an you will, you little bandog!"

So saying, Captain Brooke locked the door of the cellar with a key that he took from his pocket, and then

he led the way in silence across the herb garden. Through a door which he unlocked they entered a wing of the great house, where sacks of flour and barrels of biscuit were stowed. There he took down a cloak that hung upon a peg and cast it about him, so that his mean garments were hidden, and he laid aside the patch that was over his eye.

From the store-room they entered a long passage, and so, by corridors that Merrylips knew well, came to a little study in the second story. There they found Captain Norris, who seemed to be waiting for Captain Brooke.

"You come late, George," said Captain Norris. "I thought you lost. What news?"

"They muster three hundred dragoons and a troop of pioneers, and thereto they have three pieces of ordnance, fetched from Ryeborough," reported Captain Brooke. "Peter Hatcher holdeth the chief command, and one of Lord Caversham's sons is there besides, come with the guns from Ryeborough. Their march is surely for Monksfield, and they are like to be upon us ere the dawn."

Now when Merrylips heard all this, she knew that Rupert had told the truth and that the Roundheads were coming to attack them. At that thought she felt her heart beat faster.

To be sure, she had lived two years among Roundheads. She knew that they were not three yards tall and that they did not dine on babies, — at least, not at Larkland. But she had heard so many tales of their cruelty, since she had come to Monksfield, that she had begun to think that the Roundheads who went to battle must be very different from Will Lowry.

Besides, was not this Hatcher who commanded the enemy the selfsame Hatcher of Horsham that had made her brother Munn a prisoner? It was no wonder, perhaps, that when Merrylips thought of Colonel Hatcher, she had to finger her pistol, to give herself courage.

Just then Captain Norris seemed for the first time to notice her. He asked sternly what she was doing there, and Captain Brooke told him how Merrylips had come upon him at the still-house and would not promise to be silent.

Merrylips grew quite frightened, so vexed and impatient both men seemed.

"I am main sorry, sirs," she faltered, "but indeed I could not promise. I'm a soldier, and a soldier must report to his commander a thing that seemeth so monstrous strange."

"A soldier, are you?" said Captain Norris. "Well, some day, no doubt, you'll be one, and not a bad one

neither. But for now, remember, not one word of what you have seen and heard this afternoon!"

"I promise, sir," Merrylips answered, and saluted Captain Norris, as his officers did, and marched out of the room.

She was very proud of the praise that Captain Norris had given her, and of the secret that she shared with the two officers. She wished only that Master Rupert, with his gun, knew how she had been honored!

Still, she could not help wondering how Captain George Brooke had learned all that about the Roundheads in the cellar of the still-house. Perhaps he was a wizard, she concluded, and she so frightened herself with that thought that she fairly ran through the dim passages, and never stopped till she reached the lighted mess-room.

Well, she did not breathe a word, of course, for she had given her promise. It must have been Captain Norris himself that had the news spread abroad at Monksfield. At any rate, inside an hour every soul in the garrison knew that they were likely to be attacked at daybreak.

That night at supper, you may be sure, nothing was talked of among the Monksfield officers but the numbers and the strength of the enemy.

"So one of my lord Caversham's sons is of the attacking party?" asked Nick Slanning.

"What would you?" said Captain Brooke, who still was very brown of face, for he had found the walnut stain hard to wash off.

"They are all rank rebels, the whole house of Caversham," he went on. "His Lordship, old Rob Fowell, the white-haired hypocrite, is in command for the Parliament at Ryeborough. And did he not give his eldest daughter in marriage to that arrant Roundhead, Peter Hatcher? 'Tis but in nature that one of my lord's hopeful sons should march against us at Hatcher's right hand."

"By chance, do you know which one of Caversham's sons it is that cometh with Hatcher?" Lieutenant Digby looked up suddenly to ask.

"'Tis the third son, Dick Fowell," Captain Brooke made answer.

"Dick Fowell?" cried Digby, and flushed dully. "Heaven be thanked for good luck!"

"You know him?" asked Slanning.

"At home I dwell a neighbor to Lord Caversham," Digby answered. "Yes, I know Dick Fowell, and if we meet in the fight, by this hand! he'll have good cause to know me."

As he spoke, Digby laughed, and when he left the

room, he still was laughing. But in his laughter there was something that made a dry place come in Merrylips' throat and an emptiness at the pit of her stomach.

Hastily she pulled out her pistol, and she went and sat by the fire, and rubbed it with a rag, just as she had seen Rupert clean his carabine. But while she seemed so busy, she could not help hearing Captain Brooke and Cornet Slanning, who were left alone at table, speak together. She knew that it was of her that they spoke.

"'Twere better," said Slanning, "that Captain Norris had ventured it, after all, and sent the little rogue hence a week agone."

"Not to be thought on!" Captain Brooke replied. "You know well that the ways were straitly laid. And who'd 'a' dreamed the assault would be made so soon!"

Merrylips could not keep from glancing up. Then, when they saw that she was listening, the two men instantly laid off their grave looks, and began to chaff her.

"What dost thou think to do with that murderous pistol, eh, Rittmeister?" said Slanning.

Merrylips ran to him, and leaning against his shoulder, said: —

"Good Cornet Slanning, I could do far more, an you gave me a carabine, such as Rupert Hinkel hath, and a flask of powder, and a touch-box, and a pouch, and a piece of match as long as my arm."

"That's a gallant lad!" said Captain Brooke. "I see well, Tibbott, that thou art not afraid."

"Body a' truth!" cried Merrylips, and stood up very straight. "I'm not feared of the scurvy Roundheads, no, not I! I shall fight 'em to-morrow — the base rogues that have taken my brother prisoner! Ay, and with mine own hand I have good hope to kill some among 'em!"

CHAPTER XIX

THE END OF THE DAY

THAT night Merrylips slept on a form in the mess-room, with Lieutenant Crashaw's cloak wrapped about her. She had meant to sit up all night, to be ready when the attack came. Indeed, she had lain wide awake till midnight, and had thought to herself that she was glad to be lying in the lighted room, where the officers came in and out, rather than in her own dark and lonely chamber.

But after midnight her eyelids grew heavy, and she heard the challenge of the sentries and the hurrying of feet in the courtyard fainter and farther away. Then she slept, and dreamed of Walsover. She was telling Flip proudly that she should go to the wars, for all she was but a wench, when she woke, with a sound of firing in her ears, and began a day that seemed to her in after days to be itself a series of dreams.

A window in the mess-room stood open, and through it a dank wind was blowing. The sky was still dark, but the stars were few. On the hearth the logs had

fallen into white ash, and the one candle on the table was guttering into a pool of melted wax. The room was empty, and awesomely still, but off in the darkness, where the dank wind blew, strange noises could be heard. Footsteps echoed in the flagged courts, muskets cracked, and then, like a tongue of flame, the clear call of a trumpet cleft the dark.

Merrylips ran out into the great courtyard. She was cursed at, flung aside, jostled by men who were hurrying to their posts. And the trumpet called, and the shots cracked faster and faster, while overhead the stars went out and the sky grew pale.

In the wan daylight Merrylips saw the banner that floated over Monksfield. It was red, and by its hue it told to all the world that the house was held for the king, and would be held for him while one drop of blood ran red in the veins of his followers.

Against the stable wall sat a trooper whom Merrylips knew. He was trying to tie a bandage about his arm, with his left hand and his teeth. She helped him, fixing the bandage neatly, as she had been taught by Lady Sybil. She asked him about the fight, in a steady little voice that she scarcely knew for her own. While she was speaking, she heard a great burst of shouting and of firing on the west side of the house. The wounded man leaped to his feet. He caught up

his carabine in his sound hand and made off across the courtyard.

"God and our right!" he shouted as he ran.

Merrylips shouted too. She snatched her pistol from her sash and ran, as the trooper had run, till she found herself at the foot of the western rampart, where one twilight she had tried to comfort Rupert. She found Rupert there now. His face was smudged with powder, and he was loading guns and passing them up to the men on the rampart above him. They were firing fast, all but one or two who lay quiet.

"Shall I aid thee?" Merrylips asked.

Rupert nodded, as if he had no time to quarrel now. So she knelt at his side and helped him to load the guns for hours and hours, as it seemed to her. Right overhead the sun came out from the gray film of clouds. The light was reflected from the steel helmets and the gleaming back-pieces of the troopers on the ramparts.

"Come!" said Rupert, suddenly.

Holding fast to the gun that he had just loaded, he scrambled up the rampart, and Merrylips scrambled after him. She saw that the fields below, which had been so peaceful on that twilight when she last had looked upon them, were all alive now with mounted men. A line of low trees that she remembered, some two hundred feet away, was now a line of gray smoke,

spangled with red flashes of fire. All round her little clods of dirt kept spurting up so that she was sprinkled with dust. In the air, every now and then, was a humming, as of monstrous bumblebees.

She did not know what had happened, in the moment of darkness and outcry through which she had passed. She was off the rampart. She was sitting on the porch of the great house, and over her stood a big, surly fellow, a trooper who had been least among her friends.

"And if I catch thee again within range of the firing," she heard him say, "for the sake of mine own bairn at home, I swear I'll twist thy neck!"

The trooper was gone, and she sat staring at a red stain upon her sleeve. It was blood, and yet she was not hurt, she knew. She wondered what those cries had been that she had heard, and what had been the weight that had fallen against her.

She was very hungry. She was ashamed to think of such a thing, but she had not eaten since the night before. She stole into the mess-room and from the table got a pocketful of bread.

While she was gnawing at it, she heard a louder noise that drowned the cracking of the muskets. At first she thought that it was a sound within her own ears, but when she had run out into the courtyard, she heard the men about her saying: —

"'Tis the great guns from Ryeborough!"

Through the rattle of the muskets and the boom of the artillery, a sharp cry rang through the courtyard: "Fire!" Against the gray sky a spurt of pale flame could be seen on the thatched roof of one of the great barns.

Merrylips ran to the spot, screaming "Fire!" too, with all her might, yet she could not hear her own voice in the din. All the men who were not on the firing line — horseboys and cooks and farriers and wounded troopers — flocked to the barn. They scrambled to the roof. They tore off the blazing thatch by handfuls and cast it into the court below. They fetched buckets of water.

Merrylips worked with the rest. She was drenched to the skin with spilt water. She burned her hands with the blazing thatch. She was hoarse with shouting and half choked with smoke.

All about her, on the sudden, sounded a clatter of hoofs. She felt herself caught roughly by the arm and dragged against the wall of the barn. Past her a line of horses, that plunged and struggled as they sniffed the fire, were heading for the great gate of Monksfield.

"'Tis a sally they go upon, God speed 'em!" cried a voice beside her.

She looked, and saw that it was Rupert that had spoken. It must have been he that had dragged her back from the hoofs of the horses. Still holding her arm, he led her across the court and down the flagged passage to the buttery hatch.

"Give us to drink!" he cried.

The man at the hatch gave them a leathern jack, half full of water that was dashed with spirits. They drank from it, turn and turn about, and Merrylips felt new courage rise in her.

Through the flagged passage she looked out at the barn, where the smoke rose murkily against the sunset sky. She saw that with every puff it sank lower. She listened, pausing as she drank, and she heard, in what seemed blank stillness, only the feeble crackling of hand-arms.

Rupert took the words from her lips.

"They've silenced the great guns!" he cried. "The day is ours, young Venner! Hurrah!"

Side by side they dashed out into the courtyard. They found it full of men who shouted and cast up their caps. The day was theirs! The day was theirs! they cried on all sides. In the nick of time Captain Brooke had led a charge that had silenced the great guns from Ryeborough. God and our right! Long live the king! Long live his loyal garrison of Monksfield!

In the midst of the shouting and the rejoicing, the sallying party came riding back, with the captured guns. Among horses' heels and dismounting men Merrylips went shouting with the loudest: "Long live the king! Down wi' the Parliament! Death to all rebels!" till she found herself in the thickest of the crowd.

A young man stood there, staggering, held up by the grasp that one of the troopers had laid upon his shoulder. His helmet was off. His chestnut hair was clotted with blood, and there was a long smear of it upon his cheek. He wore no sword, and his officer's sash was of orange, the color of the Parliament.

Scarcely had Merrylips grasped the fact that he was a rebel officer and a prisoner in the hands of her friends, when Miles Digby came smashing his way through the crowd. He was coatless and powder-blackened, and his face was the face that he had shown on the day when he had beaten Rupert.

"So 'tis thou, Dick Fowell?" said he, with such words as Merrylips knew not the meaning of, and full and fair he struck the rebel officer a blow in the face.

The young man reeled and fell heavily, full length, upon the cobbles of the courtyard. A savage shout broke from those that stood near. One of the horse-

boys kicked him as he lay. But Merrylips stood with the outcry against the rebels struck dumb upon her lips. For this rebel Dick Fowell had chestnut hair, like Munn, and if any one had struck Munn like that, when he was a prisoner — Merrylips caught her breath.

Suddenly Miles Digby's eye had lighted on her. He seized her by the shoulder.

"Here, you, Tibbott Venner!" he shouted madly. "'Tis time you were blooded, little whelp! Kick this dog — d'ye hear me? He won't strike back. They've got your brother prisoner amongst 'em. Serve him as they'll serve your brother! Kick the fellow — or 'twill be the worse for you!"

"I will not!" screamed Merrylips.

She saw the savage faces about her, the savage face of Miles Digby bending over her, and at her feet she saw the limp figure of the helpless man that might have been Munn. In that moment it seemed to her that she smelled blood, that she tasted it, bitter upon her tongue, and should not lose the taste for all her days. Maddened with fear, she struggled in Digby's grasp.

"Let me go! Let me go!" she screamed. "You vile coward! A pest choke you! Let me go!"

"Digby!" a stern voice shouted above the uproar of the crowd.

It might have been Captain Norris that spoke, or it might have been George Brooke. Merrylips never knew. But she did know that the grasp was taken from her arm, and blindly she turned and ran from the spot.

CHAPTER XX

LADY SYBIL'S GODDAUGHTER

WHEN Merrylips stopped running, she found herself in the darkest corner of the bare, stone-paved room that took up the ground-floor of the wash-house. At her feet was a heap of old sacks, and she burrowed in among them, and lay gasping for breath.

She was sure that Miles Digby would follow her. On that account she had not dared run to her own chamber. For she was afraid of Digby now — yes, and afraid of all the men in Monksfield that had been her friends.

As she lay in the darkness that deepened in the wash-house, she saw the faces of Lieutenant Crashaw and her own brother Munn, as they looked on indifferently, while they wasted the corn of the poor folk at Storringham. She saw the face of Lieutenant Digby, as he struck Dick Fowell down. Such deeds were a part of war, which she had thought was all brave riding and feats of honor and bloodless victory.

She pressed her face between her arms, and as she did so, felt against her cheek the blood that had stif-

fened on her sleeve. At the feel of it she cried aloud.

Oh, she was sick and frightened of it all! She was ashamed of the boy's dress that she wore, of Digby's oaths that had been on her tongue, of the draught that she had drunk at the buttery hatch, of the loud threats that she had spoken against the rebels. She was not the lad, Tibbott Venner, and she knew it now. She was Lady Sybil's little goddaughter. She wanted to be again where she could wear her own girlish dress, where she would hear only gentle voices, where such things as she had seen this day could never be done.

"But I did not kick him after he had fallen," she kept repeating. "I remembered not to strike one that was weaker than myself."

She found her only comfort in thinking that in this, at least, she had done as Lady Sybil would have wished her to do. For in that hour she felt so soiled in body and in soul that she feared that she never again could be Lady Sybil's little girl.

It was pitchy dark in the wash-house when Merrylips heard steps just outside and the clatter of the door flung open. She burrowed deeper among the sacks and held her breath. In the stillness she heard rough voices speak: —

"In with you, you cursed rebel!"

"Stand on your feet, you dog!"

Then she heard a sound as of a dead weight let fall upon the floor, the bang of a door shut to, the rattle of a bolt in its socket. Softly she drew breath again, and as she did so, she heard in the darkness a stifled moan.

All at once she realized what had happened. A wounded rebel, a dying man, it might be, had been imprisoned in the very place where she was hidden. In terror she flung aside the sacks that covered her. No matter if she was afraid of Digby! She was more afraid to stay here with this Roundhead. She would run to the door and shout to them to open and let her out.

But as Merrylips rose softly to her feet, a pale light flickered through the wash-house. It came from the narrow window, high in the eastern wall, that looked into the great court, where, no doubt, torches had been newly kindled. The light fell upon a man who was sitting on the stone floor, not ten feet from her corner, with his arm cast across his knee and his head bowed heavily upon his arm. His hair was chestnut-colored, ruddy in the light, like Munn's, and by that token Merrylips knew him for Dick Fowell.

For many moments she stood, without daring to move, while she wondered what she should do. For if she called at the door, as she had planned to do, perhaps Digby would come. If he came, perhaps he

would strike Fowell again. Perhaps he would try to make her strike him. No, no, she could not call now, but surely she could not stay a prisoner for hours with this Roundhead!

While she was thus thinking, Dick Fowell groaned again. He would be ashamed, no doubt, when he found that he had let a child see that he was in pain. Somehow it seemed to Merrylips not quite honorable to be there without his knowing it.

Hesitatingly she went toward him, but it was not until she stood right over him that Fowell looked up. She saw his face, all drawn and ghastly under the sweat and blood that were dried upon it, and his haggard eyes that looked upon her, yet did not seem to see her. In that moment she forgot that he was a Roundhead, such as she had hoped to slay. She saw only that he was hurt and suffering, and down she went on her knees beside him.

"Doth thy poor head hurt?" she whispered, in her tenderest girl-voice.

With her two arms about him — and a heavy weight he was! — she eased him down till he rested on the floor. She dragged the old sacks from the corner and pillowed his injured head upon them. He did not speak, but he seemed so far conscious of her presence that he stifled his groans right manfully.

But presently, while she knelt beside him, he whispered, as if the words were forced from him: —

"Water! Give me to drink!"

She laid her hand lightly on his face. She could feel how cracked and dry were his lips.

"I'll fetch it to thee," she promised, saying "thou" to this tall Dick Fowell as if he were her brother or a little child.

In the wash-house was an old bucking-tub on which she could stand. And in the western wall was a window that looked upon the little paved court, where only yesterday she had been playing ball. The window was too narrow for Dick Fowell to have escaped that way, and so his jailers knew, but little slender Merrylips had no trouble in scrambling through it.

From the little court she stole to the buttery hatch, where all night long strong waters were served out to the weary and wounded soldiers. As she went, she kept close in the shadow of the buildings, for she was sick with the dread of meeting Miles Digby. But she found no one to hinder her. Except for the sentries, who kept watch upon the walls, the Monksfield garrison were resting on their arms against the morning.

From the man at the buttery hatch Merrylips got a flasket full of wine and water.

"For the lieutenant," she answered when she was questioned.

She guessed that such was Dick Fowell's rank, and she hoped that it was no lie she told, even though the man should believe that it was for Lieutenant Crashaw or Lieutenant Digby that she had been sent to fetch the wine and water.

From the same man she begged a great leathern bottle, and this she filled with water at the well in the middle of the courtyard. As she drew the water, she looked about her. Above her head the stars were shining cold, and far away, across the walls, upon the hills that lay to eastward, she could see the ruddy fires where the rebels lay encamped.

With the bottle and the flasket Merrylips hurried back to the little paved court. She sought out the form that she had left yesterday by the wall of the herb garden. She pushed it beneath the window of the wash-house, and climbing upon it, soon had scrambled back into Dick Fowell's prison.

She held the flasket to his lips, and he drank, with long breaths of content. Then, in a dark corner, she stripped off her shirt and replaced her doublet and her leathern coat upon her bared shoulders. With a rag torn from the shirt she washed the dust and blood from Dick Fowell's face, and cleansed the wound on his

head, as well as she was able. Then she bandaged the hurt place with strips of the shirt and she gave him again to drink from the flasket. After that she could do nothing but sit by him upon the paved floor, and when he muttered, half delirious, as once or twice he did, try to quiet him, with her hand against his cheek.

The light flickered and faded in the wash-house, as the torches in the courtyard died down. Once, in the west, a burst of firing rattled out, and sank again to deeper silence. Through the western window came the chill light of the setting moon. Merrylips had dozed for a moment, perhaps, but she roused at the sound of a bolt withdrawn. She looked up, and in the open doorway she saw Miles Digby stand.

Yet she was not afraid. She kept her place, on her knees, at Fowell's side, with her hand upon his hand, and "Hush!" she said to him, for he had stirred uneasily, as if he, too, had caught the sound of Digby's coming. Across his helpless body she looked at Digby.

"He is hurt. Thou must not waken him," she said.

Digby, with the reek of battle half cleared from his brain, looked upon her in the moonlight. In that moment perhaps he saw, kneeling by the wounded man, something greater in strength than the boy Tibbott, with whom he had jested and played, something greater in

"HE IS HURT. THOU MUST NOT WAKEN HIM," SHE SAID.

compassion even than the maid, Sybil Venner, that little Merrylips should one day be.

In any case, he came no farther into the room. Perhaps he dared not face what faced him there in the form of a little child. For an instant he stood with his hand upon the latch, and then he went forth again, and slammed and bolted the door behind him.

"What was't?" Dick Fowell whispered, and suddenly he tightened his grasp on Merrylips' hand.

"I dreamed," he whispered. "I dreamed — Miles Digby was come — to settle the old score."

"Think not of him," soothed Merrylips. "For he will not harm thee, Dick. I will not suffer him to do thee harm."

CHAPTER XXI

WHEN THE CAPTAIN CALLED

It was broad daylight, and once more the fire of muskets was sputtering along the walls of Monksfield, when at last Dick Fowell opened his eyes. He looked at Merrylips, and smiled, and when he smiled, his face grew boyish and winning.

"So!" said he. "Thou, at least, wert real, and not a phantom in those black dreams where I was laboring. Thou hast been at my side the livelong night?"

Merrylips nodded. She gave him the flasket, which still held a little of the wine and water, and the bread which was in her pocket, and she sat by him, while he propped himself on his elbow and ate and drank.

"I saw thee yesterday," said Fowell, presently.

"In the courtyard," answered Merrylips, in a low voice. "When Miles Digby — he tried to make me, but I didn't! I didn't!"

"I remember," said Fowell, and his eyes narrowed at the memory. "Child, what brought thee, bred among such as Digby, to succor me last night?"

Merrylips swallowed a lump in her throat before she could answer. Now that she heard Fowell speak in that firm voice, she no longer felt that she was protecting him. Instead she felt little and weary, and herself in sore need of his protection.

"It was — because of my brother," she whispered at last. "They made him prisoner, there at Loxford. I hope — perchance — some one had pity on him."

She was angry that it should be so, but as she thought of Munn, helpless and ill-treated, perhaps, as Fowell had been, she felt the tears gather upon her lashes.

At that Fowell sat up quickly, though he made a wry face at the effort that it cost him. He put his arm about her, and spoke as gently as one of her own Cavalier friends could have spoken.

"Cheerly, my lad! Tell me the name of this brother of thine, and when I come clear of Monksfield, I promise thee I'll do my best endeavor to seek him out and requite him for thy tenderness."

She whispered the name, "Munn Venner," and she felt the start of surprise that Fowell gave.

"Venner?" said he. "Sure, thou art never one of the Venners of Walsover? Then by all that's marvellous I knew thine eldest brother, Tom Venner, two years agone at New College. A proper merry lad he was! And thou art a brother of Tom's! Thou must

be the little one he called Flip, though I had judged him to be older."

Merrylips answered neither yes nor no. She hoped it was no fib to let Dick Fowell think that she was her brother Flip, and not a little girl. Whatever happened, she must keep the secret that Munn had bidden her to keep. But she thought it no harm, in answer to Fowell's questions, to tell him how she had dwelt in Will Lowry's household at Larkland and had come to Monksfield by Munn's aid. Indeed she was glad to talk with Fowell. He seemed like an old friend, since he had known her brother Longkin at Oxford.

But soon Dick Fowell said: "I'm loath to part with thee, little truepenny, but haply thy gentle friends in garrison will not be over-pleased at the company thou art keeping here. Were it not best thou shouldst slip hence and leave me?"

Merrylips hesitated, and then he added, smiling: —

"Have no fear, child! Lieutenant Digby and I will do each other no mortal damage."

Merrylips feared that her next question was uncivil, but she had to put it. Point-blank she asked: —

"Why doth Lieutenant Digby hate you so?"

"A long tale," said Fowell, and frowned, though perhaps it was only with the pain of his hurt head.

"We Fowells," he went on, "dwell neighbors to

the Digbys yonder in Berkshire, and since my grandfather's time, faith, there hath been little love lost between us. There was at first a dispute over some lands, and then a plenty of wrongs and insults, — on both sides, no doubt. As little lads, Miles Digby and I came more than once to fisticuffs. And then, two years agone, he shot my dog that ran at my heels, vowing that I did trespass on his father's lands. For that I gave him such a trouncing as it seemeth he hath not forgot."

The arm that Fowell had laid about Merrylips tightened in a grip that almost hurt her.

"I do forgive him what happened yesterday," Fowell said, as if he found it hard to say. "But I hope the Lord in His goodness may let me meet him once again when I wear a sword!"

Scarcely had Fowell uttered this pious wish, when there came a clattering of the bolt in the door of the wash-house.

"'Tis Digby!" cried Merrylips, and felt herself half choked with the beating of her heart.

But it was not the lieutenant, whom she feared for Dick Fowell's sake. It was a corporal and a couple of troopers who had come to fetch the prisoner to Captain Norris. They were in great haste. They seemed scarcely to notice or to care that she was in the wash-

house. But for all their haste, she saw that they were sullenly civil toward Lieutenant Fowell, and they even helped him to walk away. He needed help, for in spite of all that he could do, he staggered as soon as he stood upon his feet.

When Dick Fowell had been led away, Merrylips went slowly out into the courtyard. She felt faint and cold, and she was almost trembling at the thought that her old friends all would scorn and hate her, because she had helped a Roundhead. But she found the garrison too tired with the hours of fighting that were past, and too busy with making ready for the fight that was to come, to pay much attention to one small lad or wonder where he had spent the hours of the night.

Ever since daybreak, she learned, there had been hard fighting, and many men had been killed and wounded. Cornet Slanning had been shot through the leg, and Lieutenant Crashaw, who had led out a sallying party, had been cut off from the garrison and made prisoner.

It was because of this that Captain Norris had sent for Dick Fowell, and the guards were treating him civilly. Colonel Hatcher was offering to exchange Lieutenant Crashaw for his brother-in-law, Dick Fowell, and so sorely did the Monksfield garrison need officers that Captain Norris had agreed to the exchange.

So white flags had been hung out on either side, and the firing stopped. Presently, about noontime, Dick Fowell was put on a horse and taken outside the gates of Monksfield, where he should be handed over to his own men. Merrylips' eyes met his, as he was riding forth. He did not speak, or even smile upon her, but she guessed that he did this out of caution, lest any show of friendliness from him, a Roundhead, should do her harm among the Cavaliers.

Half an hour later Eustace Crashaw was once more within the walls of Monksfield. He was very grave of face, and he stammered more than ever as he told Captain Norris the number of men and the store of ammunition that the rebels had with them. Colonel Hatcher had shown all to him, in bravado, and bidden him tell his captain that, thus furnished, they meant to sit there till they had reduced the garrison.

When Captain Norris heard this, he bit his mustaches. He looked so stern that Merrylips, who had stolen near, hopéd with all her heart that he would never learn how she had helped the brother-in-law of this boastful Colonel Hatcher.

Soon the guns were cracking again, all along the walls, but to-day Merrylips had no wish to go upon the ramparts and see men hurt and slain. She was turning away to the great house, when whom should

she meet but Rupert. She was glad to see him, for she remembered how friendly they had been, only the day before. She halted, and would have spoken, but she saw that he was scowling upon her in his old way.

"How is it with thee, little sister?" he jeered.

Merrylips thought that now surely he had hit upon her secret. She was so frightened that she could only stare at him without speaking.

"I thought thou hadst mettle in thee, for a young one," Rupert went on. "But to go sneaking away and coddle a vile rebel, only for that he had come by a bump in the head, as he well had merited! Tibbott Venner, thou art no better than a girl!"

In her relief that she was not yet found out, Merrylips did not care what she said.

"Then is a girl a better gentleman than thou, thou horseboy!" she answered back. "And I be glad that I am like a girl!"

So saying, she trudged away to her own chamber. There she put on a fresh shirt, and then she fumbled in the hole in her mattress and drew out the silver ring that had been Lady Sybil's. She hung it about her neck on a cord, within her shirt, just as she had used to wear it. It was like a girl to wear it so, and she wanted to remember always that she was indeed a girl.

While she sat fingering the ring, she felt that she did

not care what Rupert or the Monksfield garrison thought of her. She knew that she had done what Lady Sybil would have wished a tender-hearted little maid to do. But as the afternoon passed, and the room grew dark, and the rebel watchfires kindled on the hills, she began to think how far away was Lady Sybil, and how near were the Monksfield garrison. And since Rupert knew that she had helped their captive enemy, all the garrison must know, and surely all would cease to be her friends.

As she was thinking thus, and remembering the stern face that Captain Norris had worn, she heard a knock upon her door. When she called, "Come!" there appeared on the threshold a slender figure that she knew could be only Rupert's.

He spoke in a formal, dry voice.

"I am sent to find you, Master Venner. Captain Norris hath a word to say unto you."

Within her shirt Merrylips clutched at the silver ring and tried to take courage.

"The captain — is fain to speak with me?" she faltered.

"Ay," said Rupert. "Now — this moment. Come! He waiteth for you."

CHAPTER XXII

A PARTING OF THE WAYS

In the mess-room, where the candles were lighted, Captain Tibbott Norris sat alone at the table. Before him were a dish of stewed meat and a cup of wine, and he ate and drank steadily, but all the time his eyes were bent upon a map that was spread open at his elbow. He had not shaved in two days, and his unkempt face looked old and tired.

For a full minute Merrylips must have hesitated on the threshold before Captain Norris noticed that she was there. Then he peered at her through the candlelight, and said he: —

"Thou, is it, Tibbott? And young Hinkel, too? Come you in, both lads, and shut to the door."

At heart Merrylips was glad that Rupert was to stay in the room. She was almost afraid to be left alone with the stern captain. But when he spoke again, she went to him obediently, and halted at his side. He turned and laid his hand on her shoulder, just as he had done on the day when she first had entered the

mess-room. And suddenly, as she met the look in his tired eyes, she no longer feared him.

But when Captain Norris spoke, it was to Rupert, not to Merrylips, that he said the words.

"Young Hinkel," he began, "I've marked you for long as a brisk lad, of riper wit than many of like years. So to-night, when I cannot spare one man from the garrison, I shall trust you, a lad, with a man's work."

Rupert's eyes shone. He drew himself up as tall as he could, and stood at salute, while he listened to the captain.

"This child," said Captain Norris, and drew Merrylips to stand against his knee, "must leave Monksfield to-night. But to send him as a non-combatant, under a white flag, to Colonel Hatcher, would mean to return him to the Roundhead kinsfolk from whom his brother snatched him."

"Prithee, not that!" begged Merrylips.

She would have said more, if she had not found comfort in the captain's next words.

"So the only course left," he went on, "is to set him outside our lines, and let him make his own way unto the nearest of our garrisons. You, Rupert Hinkel, shall go with him. Take him unto his kindred, and they will requite you well. Fail the lad, or play him false, and I shall seek you out and hang you."

This last the captain said as quietly as if he promised Rupert a box on the ear, or a ha'penny, or some such trifle. Yet quiet as his voice was, there was in it something that made Merrylips shrink and Rupert stiffen.

"I will not fail him, sir, on the faith of a gentleman," Rupert promised, in a voice almost as quiet as the captain's own.

Then Captain Norris made Rupert stand by him, on the side opposite Merrylips, whom he still held fast, and he pointed out to him on the map lines that were paths and little specks that stood for villages. Point by point he taught Rupert the way to the nearest Cavalier outpost at King's Slynton, fifteen miles distant, and he gave him a pass-word, by which the commander of that garrison should know that he came indeed from Monksfield, and was to be helped upon his journey.

"He will find means to send you both to Walsover," said Captain Norris. "Your troubles all are at an end when once you reach King's Slynton, and the distance thither is not great."

Then he laid upon the table a handful of small coins, shillings and sixpences and groats. These he bade Rupert hide within his clothes.

"Show but one piece at a time," he cautioned.

"'Twill rouse question if so young a boy seem too well stored with money."

"And shall I take my carabine, sir, for our defence?" asked Rupert.

He was fairly a-quiver with eagerness, and his face fell when the captain answered, "No."

But Rupert felt better when the captain pointed to the form by the fire and said that yonder lay what they must bear upon their journey. For on the form was not only a packet of what seemed food, and a flask, but a small pistol, with a steel patron full of cartridges and a touch-box, all complete.

"You have your orders," said Captain Norris. "Now rest you here till you are sent for, and eat your suppers too."

He rose as if the talk were at an end, and for the first time spoke to Merrylips.

"Thou must lay off that Cavalier sash, be sure," he said. "And art thou warmly clad against this journey?"

"Ay, sir," Merrylips answered.

She spoke cheerily. For she was going to leave Monksfield, that in the last hours she had found so hateful. Almost she could have laughed for joy.

"That's a brave lad!" said Captain Norris; yet somehow he seemed a little disappointed that she bore it so bravely.

"Well, God speed thee, Tibbott, and farewell!" he added after a moment, and then suddenly, with his hand upon her shoulder, bent and kissed her.

She felt the roughness of his untrimmed beard against her cheek, and then, in that same minute, he was gone from the mess-room.

The hours that followed seemed to her like a dream. She laid aside her sash, as the captain had bidden, against her journey through the enemy's country. She watched Rupert hide away the coins, one by one, within the lining of his doublet and in his pockets. She sat at the table, because Rupert did so, and she ate some cold beef and bread, though she could scarcely taste the food. She was going to leave Monksfield — that was her one thought. And for all the dangers that she might meet upon the road, and for all that she must travel with Rupert, her little enemy, she was glad to be gone.

Only one thing troubled her. How were she and Rupert to pass through the rebel lines that were drawn so closely now round Monksfield? She wanted to ask Rupert that question, but she was too proud to be the first to break the silence that was between them.

So she sat playing with the wax that guttered from the candle on the table, and blinking at the light. Perhaps for a minute she had nodded, with her head

upon her breast, when she felt a blast of cold air from the open door, and found that Captain Brooke was standing at her elbow.

"Briskly, lads!" he bade.

Already Rupert had pocketed the pistol and the flask, and taken up the packet of food. With scarcely a moment lost, they were all three outside the mess-room, in the flagged passage, and just then a shadow fell across their path, and before them stood Miles Digby.

"Going hence, eh?" he said. "Then God be wi' ye, Tibbott."

Digby held out his hand, and for the life of her Merrylips could not have helped doing what she did. All in an instant she seemed to see the face that he had worn when he struck Fowell, who stood wounded and helpless before him. She put her two hands behind her and shrank from him.

He laughed, but his laughter was half-hearted, and he swore an oath. Then she heard no more of him, for Captain Brooke was heading down the passage, as if he had no time to waste, and she ran after him.

Through corridors that she knew well they went, half lighted by the dark lantern that the captain carried. They crossed the echoing space of the great store-room, and through a narrow door stepped out beneath the

stars. They stood in the herb garden, and Merrylips had guessed where they were going, even before the captain led them down the steps to the door beneath the still-house.

"Do we go this way, even as you came?" she said to him.

She spoke in a whisper, lest Rupert, who did not share the secret, might overhear.

"Ay, by the same path," said Captain Brooke. "'Tis a buried passage that the monks must have builded in old days. Keep silent touching it, you two," he added gravely, and in the archway of the door turned the light full upon their faces. "To set you beyond danger we trust you with a secret that might be the ruin of the garrison."

Then Merrylips knew that on the day when she had seen Captain Brooke come from the still-house, he had been out by the passage to spy upon the enemy. She wondered that she had been so stupid as not to have guessed as much.

Through the damp cellar, where the long, slimy tracks of snails gleamed on the walls, they reached the low entrance of the buried passage. The walls were all of stone that sweated with moisture, and the roof was so low that Captain Brooke had to stoop as he went. Underfoot the ground was uneven. More than

once Merrylips stumbled as she hurried to keep up with the captain's strides. Every moment, too, she found it harder to draw breath. Not only was she panting with the haste that she must make, but the air seemed lifeless in the passage, and in the dark lantern the candle burned blue and feeble.

"Journey's end, boys!" Captain Brooke spoke at last, as it seemed to her from a great distance.

Over his shoulder she saw a patch of dark sky, where stars were twinkling. Across the patch ran inky black lines that were leafless stalks of bushes. The fresh air of the upper world came keen and sweet to her nostrils.

"Below you lieth the mere, upon the north of the rebel lines. Take your bearings by it, Rupert," said the captain. "Steer your course as Captain Norris bade, and so, good speed unto you both!"

For a moment Rupert and Merrylips stood in the low opening, which was screened by hazel bushes and a bit of ivy-covered stonework. In the passage that they had just left they watched the light of the captain's lantern till they could no longer see it in the darkness.

"So we're quit of Monksfield!" Merrylips said then, and as she thought of her last hours in the garrison, she spoke in a happy voice.

"You're rejoiced, eh?" Rupert answered harshly. "Truth, I'm not! The best friend I have I left yonder, old Claus! And I'll not be near him now, in the last fight."

"Last fight —" echoed Merrylips.

"Dost thou not understand, little fool?" whispered Rupert. "The rebels will attack to-morrow, and we're now so weak that it well may be — Dost thou not see? 'Tis to save thy life the captain sendeth thee away, and for that thou art glad to leave him, Tibbott Venner, thou little coward!"

CHAPTER XXIII

OUTSIDE KING'S SLYNTON

ALL that night Merrylips and Rupert groped their way by the paths that Captain Norris had bidden them take. At dawn they found a hiding-place at the edge of a beech wood on a low hill, and there they spent the day.

Sometimes they slept, and sometimes they ate and drank, and sometimes from their hilltop they scanned the country round them. Near at hand, in the open fields, they saw hinds that went about their work, and in the distance twice, to their alarm, they saw squads of mounted men that sped along an unseen road.

"Will those be Roundheads?" Merrylips asked.

"What an if they be?" jeered Rupert. "Thou hast a kindness unto all rebels, young Venner. Mayhap 'tis thy dear comrade, Dick Fowell, and be hanged unto him!"

For, as if they had not troubles enough, these two foolish children were making matters worse by keeping up their quarrel. Not one kind word did they exchange

from the moment of their leaving Monksfield. Rupert looked down upon his companion for a weakling and a coward. And Merrylips, for her own part, vowed that she would never ask help or kindness of him — no, not if she died for it!

So in angry silence they took up their march again when night came down. The sky was overcast, and the path was hard to find. Once they went astray and wandered into a bog, where the water oozed icily cold into their shoes.

"A brave guide art thou!" Merrylips taunted Rupert. "Thou to be set to care for me, forsooth!"

"Hold thy peace!" snapped Rupert. "I'll have thee safe at King's Slynton with the daybreak, and blithe I'll be then to wash my hands of thee, thou pestilent brat!"

"Brat thyself!" retorted Merrylips. "Thou'rt no more than a lad. And if thou art glad to be rid of me, 'tis ten times as glad I am at thought of quitting thee and coming once more amongst gentlemen."

As soon as Merrylips had spoken those last words, she knew that she had wounded Rupert cruelly. But she was so cold and footsore and wretched that she was glad to have made him suffer in his turn. Besides, she had meant what she had said. It would indeed be pleasant to set foot in the mess-room at King's

Slynton, and to be warmly greeted and petted by the officers there, as she had been by the friends that she had left ungratefully behind her.

Upheld by the thought of this welcome that awaited her, Merrylips dragged herself along at Rupert's heels all that dreary night. As worn-out a little girl as ever masked herself in boy's clothes, she saw the dawn at last break grayly over the eastern hills. The bare trees stood out from the mist, and the fields changed color from leaden hue to brown. Over the next hill, she hoped, would be King's Slynton, but she would not speak to Rupert, not even to ask that question.

Up this hill they were toiling, with Rupert in the lead. He limped a little, as Merrylips was glad to notice. Then what should they see, on the crest of the hill above them, sharply outlined against the gray sky, but a mounted man? When they looked closer, they saw that he was an armed man, and that he wore across his cuirass the orange scarf of a rebel officer.

At that sight both children shrank into the shadow of the thicket under which ran their path. But Merrylips thought less of the rebel officer than of the taunts that Rupert would surely cast at her, for having befriended the like of him. She tried to think of a bitter answer to make him, and she stiffened herself for an open quarrel, as she saw him turn toward her.

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But Rupert's face, as he looked at her, was not that of a quarrelsome little boy. It was a troubled, older face, such as she had not seen him wear.

"Hide thou here in the bushes, Tibbott," he bade. "And stay thou hidden, whatever happen, till I come again."

He did not make her his comrade so much as to tell her what he thought or feared or what he planned to do. But he chose a sheltered spot for her, deep among elder bushes and young birches, and he gave her the flask and what was left of the food. He bade her eat and drink and rest her there in safety. Then he tucked his pistol into his belt and trudged away alone over the hill to King's Slynton.

There in the thicket Merrylips sat all day, and it was the longest day that ever she had known. At first she slept, but she could not sleep all the time. Then she watched the flights of rooks that winged across the sullen sky. She watched the rabbits that scurried through the copse below her. She built little houses of dead leaves and twigs and pebbles. All sorts of things she did, not to think of what might have happened to Rupert and be afraid.

It was almost twilight when Rupert came back. He dropped down beside her under the bushes, and drew a long breath as if he were tired.

"The rebels have taken King's Slynton," he said.

Merrylips knew then that she had known that this would be his news. So she did not cry out or show fear. All she did was to ask him, "When?"

"Yesterday," he answered. "They beat our men out of the village, and have set a garrison of their own ruffians in their stead."

But there Merrylips broke in upon him. She had been peering at him sharply, and now she cried:—

"Where's thy pistol, Rupert?"

It was not so dark but that she could see how he reddened. He tried to speak roughly and angrily, but in the end he blurted out the truth.

"They took my pistol from me, there in the village," he said. "I had to venture in among them to get news. They said — the rebel soldiers said — that I must have stolen it, at the time the town was taken. They took my pistol and what money was in the pockets of my doublet. They would have searched me further, but one of their officers came up and bade them let me go. And then he set me to clean his horse's stall. I've been fetching and carrying all day — for thy rebel friends, Tibbott Venner."

Rupert spoke the jeer half-heartedly, and Merrylips made no answer. Both were too tired and frightened

to quarrel. For some time they sat in silence, while the chill shadows gathered round them. Deep in the thicket the owls began to hoot.

"Is there aught of food left?" asked Rupert, suddenly. "I'm nigh famished."

In answer Merrylips laid the packet on the ground between them. Rupert opened it, and looked at what lay within — the dry end of a loaf, a slice of beef, and some crumbs of cheese. Then he looked at Merrylips.

"Hast thou not eaten all this day?" he asked. "I bade thee, Tibbott."

"I waited — to share with thee," Merrylips answered, and somehow she choked upon the words.

"Thou art a little fool," said Rupert, angrily.

He broke the bread and on the crumb that was least hard he placed the meat and laid it on her knee.

"Eat this now!" he ordered.

"Thou hast given me all the meat," she answered. "And we must share alike."

Then Rupert caught her with his arm about her shoulders, and laid the bread in her hand.

"Eat it!" he said roughly. "Thou must have the best. I'm older and stronger than thou — and I promised I'd care for thee — and I will now, indeed I will!

Thou needst not fear, for all we may not find help at King's Slynton. I'll bring thee safe unto thy friends, and I — I'll not be rough with thee again. Now wilt thou not eat? I pray thee, Tibbott!"

And this time Merrylips took the food and ate.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE DARKEST DAY

In the dull light of the dripping morning Rupert and Merrylips sat up and looked at each other. The packet that had held their food gaped emptily at their feet, and the flask lay forlornly on its side.

"What shall we do? And whither shall we go now, Rupert?" Merrylips asked.

She chafed her cold little hands while she waited hopefully for his reply.

Rupert had his answer ready. Indeed, for twenty-four hours he had thought of little else.

"We cannot well go back to Monksfield," he said, "for no doubt the place hath fallen by now."

Merrylips nodded gravely.

"If I had known!" she said in a low voice. "I wish now I'd shaken hands with Lieutenant Digby, since he was fain to do so."

"Well," said Rupert, "we can't go back, so we must needs go forward. And since King's Slynton is no longer a Royalist garrison, we must make our way to

the nearest place that is. But we will not make such long marches as we made yesterday!" he added.

Merrylips was glad to hear those last words, for she was lame in every muscle. But she did not say that she was glad, lest Rupert think her a little milksop to be so quickly tired. Instead she asked: —

"Where is the Royalist garrison to which we shall go now? I pray thee, tell me!"

No doubt Rupert would have liked to seem wise in everything to this younger lad, but he was an honest boy. Though he hesitated, he presently spoke the truth.

"That I do not rightly know," he said. "These parts are strange to me, and Captain Norris was so sure that we should find shelter at King's Slynton that he told me nothing of the ways beyond. But we must go westward, I know, to reach the king's country."

"Ay," said Merrylips, "for Walsover lieth in the west."

"But first of all," Rupert went on, "for this I learned yesterday in the village, we must cross the river Slyne that barreth our passage into the west. And we cannot cross it by the bridge at King's Slynton, now that the rebels are there, so we must go northward to a village called Slynford, where there is a fording place."

"And is it far?" Merrylips asked as she rose stiffly to her feet.

"Not far, I think," Rupert cheered her. "Not above two league, I am sure."

Now two leagues may sound a very little distance, when the words are read by a snug fireside. But two leagues, when tramped through drizzling wet and mire, on tired feet, become a weary long journey, as Merrylips and Rupert found. It was sunset, if there had been a sun to set upon that damp and gloomy day, when they limped at last down the sticky road into Slynford.

The first sound that greeted them, as they set foot in the village street, was a dirty little boy's shouting to his mate: —

"Haste ye, Herry Dautry! The sojers do be changing guard at the ford. Come look upon 'em for a brave show!"

Then they knew that they had come too late. Here in Slynford, as at King's Slynton, was an outpost of the rebel army that barred the passage into the west.

Perhaps if they had gone straight to the ford and asked to be let cross, they might have got leave, for they were very young and harmless-looking travellers. But Rupert and Merrylips were both too tired and hungry and discouraged to pluck up heart for such a bold undertaking.

Moreover, after his sad experience in King's Slynton, Rupert was shy of getting within arm's reach of rebel soldiers. He might be robbed of what money was left him, he told Merrylips. So they agreed that they should do well to leave Slynford and try to cross the river farther north.

There followed for the two children a week of wandering that would not have been easy even for grown men. All the time they were in terror, — more than they need have been, perhaps, — lest they fall into the hands of the cruel rebels. Indeed, the country through which they passed was swarming with soldiers and with camp followers of the Parliament. And Rupert and Merrylips were sure, and rather proud of the fact, that in dress and bearing they themselves looked so much like Cavaliers that they should instantly be known for such, if they let themselves be seen by their enemies.

So they kept away from towns and villages, where they were likely to be stopped and questioned. For greater safety they travelled by night, and their food — coarse bread, and meat, and fresh cheese — they bought at lonely cottages. They slept in woods and thickets, where sometimes they found nuts and haws with which to piece out their meals. They dared not even ask too many questions about the roads that they should take,

and so it happened often that they went astray. Still, they travelled northward, in the main, along the river Slyne, till one morning they met with a rebel patrol.

The soldiers shouted to them to stand. They were half in jest, no doubt, but it was no jest to Rupert and Merrylips. In great fright they ran for their lives, as they believed, into a wood close by. They heard a shot fired after them. They heard a crashing of horses that were forced through the bushes in their rear. They ran madly up hills and down muddy hollows. When Merrylips stumbled, Rupert caught her hand and dragged her along. Not till they had left the pursuit far behind them did they drop down, all scratched and bemired, and lie sobbing for breath.

After that they shaped their course eastward, away from the danger belt between the lines, where they had been travelling. Presently, said Rupert, they would turn westward again, but for now, till the country was quieter, they would keep to the settled parts that were held for the Parliament.

It was at this time that he thought up a story to tell, if they were caught and questioned. He would say that they were cousins and that their name was Smith, for that was a common, honest-sounding name. He would say, too, that they had been at school near Hor-

sham and had run away to join the Parliament army and fight the Cavaliers.

"And we must call 'em wicked Cavaliers, and abuse 'em roundly," said Rupert, who was very proud of his plan, "and then no doubt they'll believe us little rebels and let us go about our business."

Merrylips was not over-pleased at the thought of telling so many fibs, nor did she wish to pass herself off as a rebel. More than ever she feared and hated all that party since the meeting with the Roundhead patrol. But she said nothing, for she wished to do as Rupert wished, since he was kind to her.

For Rupert had kept his word, ever since that twilight outside King's Slynton. Not once had he been rough with Merrylips. He made her rest, while he went alone to get their food. He gave her all the choicest bits. He carried her on his back when they forded streams. Because he was the older and the stronger, he took good care of her, as he had promised to do. But all the time she knew that it was only because she was weak that he was kind.

She meant to be very brave and strong. But she did not find it so easy to be a boy, out in the cold woods, as she had found it in the cheery mess-room at Monksfield. She did not whimper, no, not once, but she could not walk so stoutly as Rupert, for all her

trying. And she caught a cold, and she had such a sore throat that she could scarcely eat their hard food. Rupert did not scold, but she knew that she must seem to him weak and cowardly.

Now before long Merrylips had blistered her feet. Rupert had strained a tendon in his ankle, at the very outset, and though he made light of it, he went each day more lame. Thus crippled, they could not travel far in a single day. So it was that, about the time when they turned westward again, they found that, though they had not half finished their journey, they had spent all their money.

Soon they had nothing left but Merrylips' three half-pence. These Rupert gave one morning for a noggin of milk and a piece of soft bread, which he bought at a farmyard gate. And he made Merrylips drink and eat it, every drop and crumb.

The dairymaid from whom they bought the food must have run and told her mistress about them, for scarcely had Merrylips done eating, when the farmer's wife, a big, rosy woman, came bustling out of the house. She looked at the two little boys, who were standing forlornly by the bars, in the cold dawn, and then she called to them to come in.

Merrylips was so tired and sick that she would have gone to the woman, even if she were a rebel. But Rupert whispered: —

"'Tis a trap! No doubt she would betray us to the Roundhead soldiers!"

So saying, he caught Merrylips by the arm and hurried her away. He would not let her stop running till he had led her deep into a lonely growth of willows that drooped above a swollen brook.

"But I doubt — if she would have served us — an ill turn," Merrylips panted, as soon as she got breath. "She looked right kind."

"Ay, she was one of thy rebel friends," sneered Rupert, and flung her hand from his.

Yet there was some excuse for his ill humor. After all, he was but a young boy, and he suffered cruelly with his aching foot, and he had not eaten in hours. What with pain and hunger and fear for the future, it was no wonder, perhaps, that he was quite savage. In any case, he went and lay down in the shelter of a bank, and turned his back upon his little comrade.

Merrylips was left sitting alone by the brookside. She wondered what would become of them now. Here they were, in the enemy's country, without money, and without friends, and without strength to travel farther. Perhaps they would die right there, like the poor babes in the old ballad that Goody Trot used to sing.

When she thought of Goody Trot, she thought of

all the kind old days at Larkland, and she was almost ready to cry. But she drew from within her shirt the silver ring, and kissed it, and laid her cheek against it. She thought of Lady Sybil, and how she had told her that she could be as brave as a boy, whatever dress she wore. Then she grew ashamed that she, who was Lady Sybil's goddaughter and Sir Thomas Venner's child, should be cast down, only because she was a little cold and hungry. So she made herself sing softly, and she sat turning the ring between her fingers while she thought what a brave, merry face she would have to show to Rupert when he woke.

Suddenly, like a clap of thunder out of a clear sky, she felt a stinging blow across her cheek. Her head rang with it. Her eyes were dazzled with dancing stars. Through a haze she saw Rupert standing over her with fists clenched and eyes that flamed.

"Tibbott Venner, thou little thief!" he choked. "Give me that ring."

From where she had fallen upon her elbow Merrylips stared up at him.

"But, Rupert," she said, "'tis mine! 'Tis mine own ring."

"Thou dost lie!" he cried. "I could ha' forgiven thee aught else. But to serve me such a turn — when I had cared for thee, well as I knew! I gave thee the

last o' the bread and the milk — all of it I gave thee, because thou wast little. And then thou — thou lying little trickster! I vow I'll beat thee for't!"

Still Merrylips looked at him steadily.

"Thou art strong. Thou canst do it," she whispered.

Rupert lifted his clenched fist, but he let it fall as he met her eyes. He did not strike her. Instead he bent and snatched at the ring, where it hung about her neck. So fiercely did he snatch that he broke the cord and brought the ring away in his hand.

"Shift for thyself now!" he flung the words at her. "I'll bear wi' thee no longer, thou liar! thou thief! And to do't while I slept and trusted thee!"

Still Merrylips said not a word. Dumb and wide-eyed, she sat with her hand to her throbbing cheek, while she watched Rupert turn and stride away along the brookside. She watched till he had passed out of sight, and the branches that he had thrust aside no longer stirred.

Then she groped with her fingers and touched the broken cord where the ring had hung. She had not dreamed it, then. Rupert had robbed her, and forsaken her. She did not cry, but she gave a little moan, and drooping forward, sank upon her face.

CHAPTER XXV

AFTER THE STORM

At first Merrylips could not guess what had happened to her. Perhaps, she thought, she had been drowned. Her face was all wet and dripping, and she could hear a rushing sound of water.

But when she raised her heavy eyelids, she saw bare willow branches against a gray sky. She lay by a brookside, she remembered. The sound of water that she had heard must be the rushing of the brook.

Then she found that Rupert was bending over her. But this was a Rupert whom she had never known. This Rupert had a gray, drawn face that twitched and eyes that were wide and frightened. He was chafing her hands in his and saying over and over: —

"Tibbott! Tibbott! Don't die! Prithee, say thou wilt not die! I did not know. I am sorry. Only don't die, Tibbott! Say thou wilt not die!"

She did not understand. She could remember only that he had struck her, and she shrank from his touch.

She heard a sound of sobbing. But she knew it was not she that cried. She had promised Munn that

she would be brave. She raised her eyes again, and she saw Rupert on his knees beside her, with his ragged sleeve pressed to his face. It was he that was sobbing, for all that he was a big boy.

"But wilt thou not even let me touch thee — when 'tis to help thee?" he begged. "For I'm sorry, Tibbott. And here's thy ring again. As soon as I knew, I ran back and found thee fainting. And I would not ha' done it, Tibbott, but indeed they were very like. So I thought thou hadst taken mine, and — and it meaneth much to me, more than I can tell thee, Tibbott. And I thought, there at King's Slynton, when the rebels searched me, they would find it and take it from me. So many times since I've dreamed 'twas taken from me and was lost! So when I woke and thought to see it in thy hands, so careless, I was angered. Tibbott, wilt thou not understand and — and not forgive me, perhaps, but let me help thee? For indeed they are so like! Look but upon them, Tibbott!"

She thought that she must be very ill indeed, and that she was seeing things double. For there in Rupert's hand, as he held it out to her, lay two rings, wrought of dull old silver in the shape of two hearts entwined. She stared at them blankly, and Rupert, who thought from her silence that she was still angry, hid his face in his arms.

But in that silence Merrylips began slowly to understand what had happened. She saw that Rupert, how or why she could not guess, had had a ring like hers and prized it dearly. No wonder, then, that when he had seen her handling such a ring he had thought her a little thief, until he had searched and found his own ring in its place. He was not wholly to blame, and until that hour he had been kind.

How glad she was to feel that she could forgive him! "Rupert!" she whispered, but so softly that he did not heed.

Then she dragged herself to him and put her two arms round his shoulders.

"Rupert!" she said again, and bent and kissed him.

He put his arms about her, and for a moment they clung to each other.

"Thou art the strangest lad, Tibbott!" choked Rupert. "But thou dost not bear me ill will? Indeed thou dost not?"

Merrylips nodded, as she settled herself beside him. She felt too weak to talk, but she was very happy.

For a moment Rupert too was silent, while he busied himself in tying Merrylips' ring once more upon the broken cord. But presently he said, in a humble voice: —

"Wilt thou tell me, Tibbott — if 'tis not a secret —

how thou ever camest by this ring which is like mine own?"

"I had it of my godmother," Merrylips answered, and she was almost too faint to notice what she said. "My godmother, with whom I dwelt at Larkland — Lady Sybil Fernefould — she for whom I am named."

Rupert let his hands fall from the cord with which he was fumbling. In blank surprise he looked at her, and suddenly from his face she knew what she had said. In her dismay she roused from her faintness.

"Oh, Rupert!" she cried, and hid her hot face in her hands. "And I promised not to tell — and I have told!"

It seemed to her a long time that she sat with her face hidden and grieved for her broken promise. Then she heard Rupert say in a puzzled voice, but quite gently: —

"Lady Sybil — for whom thou art named? But then — Why, Tibbott, is it true thou art not Tibbott — that thou art a little maid?"

"Ay!" she answered with her face hidden.

Presently she felt her two hands found and taken into Rupert's hands.

"Prithee, look up!" he said. "And be not sorry. My word, I might ha' guessed it — only no one of all the men mistrusted! 'Twas because thou wast a

maid, belike, thou hadst so tender a heart, even for the pestilent rebels. And I mocked at thee for it. I am right sorry, mistress."

She looked up at Rupert then. She felt that at last they knew each other and would be friends. She was so glad that she smiled at him, and he too laughed as he knelt before her.

"How thou didst trick us all!" he cried. "Why, Tibbott — mistress, I mean —"

"My brothers call me Merrylips," she said.

Rupert cocked his head, as if he thought the name odd, but he repeated, "Merrylips," and they laughed together.

"I never knew of such a maid," Rupert kept repeating. "How couldst thou walk as thou hast done, and fare so poorly, and not fret, thou that hast been reared a gentlewoman?"

Then he hesitated and seemed to remember something.

"Merrylips," he asked, "did I dream it, or didst thou say indeed that thou didst dwell with thy godmother at a place called Larkland?"

Merrylips nodded. Rupert passed his hand across his forehead.

"There was a house called Larkland," he said slowly, "when we came first into England, Claus and I, and a

sickness was on me. And there was a kind little maid that led us home, and said we should be friends."

He paused, and sat gazing at Merrylips.

"Yes," she answered, "and next morning I sat in the cherry tree and saw thee stealing away from Larkland."

"Then it was thou indeed!" cried Rupert. "And I never knew thee, Tibbott, — Merrylips, I mean, — though I had thought upon thee often, for thou wast so kind, when every one was harsh unto us."

But now that Merrylips remembered the old days at Larkland and her godmother's suspicions of Rupert, she grew sober again.

"Wilt thou not tell me, Rupert," she said, "why thou didst steal away from Larkland, so like a thief, when we all would have used thee kindly?"

For a moment Rupert was silent. Then he drew from his pocket the silver ring that was the counterpart of the one that hung at Merrylips' neck.

"If I tell thee a part, I will tell thee all," he said, "and I am fain to tell thee, if thou wilt listen."

"Tell me everything," bade Merrylips.

So the two children settled themselves, side by side, under the bare willows, and Rupert told the story of his silver ring.

CHAPTER XXVI

HE THAT WAS LOST

"First of all," Rupert began, "my name is not Rupert Hinkel, no more than thine is Tibbott. I am no kinsman to Claus Hinkel, nor to any peasant folk. I am a gentleman's son, and come of as good blood, they say, as any in all England."

Indeed, as he spoke, with his head thrown back and his chin uplifted, Rupert looked what he claimed to be. Merrylips believed him, only hearing him say it.

"My right name," he went on, "is called Robert Lucas."

"Lucas! 'Tis a name I've heard," said Merrylips. "Perchance I shall remember where."

He looked at her eagerly.

"If thou couldst but help me!" he sighed. "I'll tell thee all, but there's so much I do not know and I can never learn. For I was but a little babe when both my father and my mother died. My father was an English gentleman, one Captain Lucas. He was an officer in the army of the Emperor Ferdinand, and

he was serving in High Germany. My mother was with him. She was an Englishwoman, a great lady in her own country, and with a face like an angel, so my nurse hath ofttimes told me.

"My mother held that the camp was too rude a place in which to nurture me. So she gave me, but three months old, to a good woman, Jettchen Kronk, a farmer's wife, who nursed me with her own child. Each week my mother would leave the camp, and ride across the hills on her palfrey, with men to attend her, and visit me for an hour.

"One day, when I was eight months old, she gave me this ring from her hand to play with. I fell asleep holding it fast, and she would not waken me to take it from me, when it came her time to go. She would get her ring when next she came unto me, she said, and bade my nurse guard it safely, for 'twas dear to her and bore the crest of her house. Then she kissed me as I slept, my nurse hath told me, and went her way, and never came again.

"For there fell a great fever on the camp, and among the rest my father and my mother must have died, for never a word was heard of them more. Many of the officers perished, as well as of the soldiers. Doubtless among them were those of my father's friends that would have been mindful of me. And presently,

to save the remnant of the troops, they were sent to another camp, miles away, across the mountains, and I was left behind, for there was none now to take thought of me.

"But Jettchen Kronk loved me. Her own child, my foster-brother, died that year, and her husband was slain, and she said that I was all was left unto her. So when her kinsmen bade her cast me forth as a beggar brat, she drove them from her house. And she reared me tenderly, as if I had been her own.

"She had me taught to read and write, both German and Latin, by the priest of the village. And she told me always how I was a gentleman and the son of a gentleman, and she showed me this silver ring that she had kept for me. Through this ring, she said, I should one day find my English kindred, who would be glad to welcome me. But the journey into England was very long, and the country was vexed with war, and she herself was poor and all unable to furnish me for the road. So I could not hope to travel into England until I was old enough and strong enough to make mine own way thither.

"'Twill be three years agone, come Eastertide, that dear Jettchen fell into a lingering sickness. She was in great fear for me, for she knew that there was none to stand my friend when she was gone. But while she

was thus troubled, there came to her a cousin, Claus Hinkel, a kind, true soul that had been for years a soldier in the army of the Emperor. He promised Jettchen that he would take me into England, to my kinsfolk there, and so she died with her heart at peace. God rest her! She was kinder to me than any in all this world."

For a little time after that Rupert sat blinking fast. Merrylips did not like to speak to him in words, but timidly she laid her hand on his, and he did not withdraw it.

"I was a very little boy," he broke out suddenly, "and foolish — and so was poor Claus! — to think 'twas an easy task we went upon. First of all, we had no money, for my nurse's kindred seized on all she owned. So for a winter I dwelt with Claus in camp in Bohemia, while he put by money for our journey into England. And there was one in the ranks, a broken Englishman, who was good-natured, and such time as he was sober, taught me my father's tongue and told me much of England.

"At last in the spring, we set out across the seas. For we had heard rumors that there would be war in this country. War was Claus Hinkel's trade, and he thought to maintain us with his sword, should we be a long time in finding my kinsfolk. But we did

not think to be long about it. We were right hopeful!

"'Twas at Brighthelmstone we landed, and hard by, in a town called Lewes, we went unto a gentleman, a magistrate, to whom the country folk directed us. I asked him whereabout in England the Lucases were dwelling. The talking fell to me, thou dost understand, for Claus had little mastery of English. But this gentleman did but laugh and bid us be off, and the next to whom we did apply was angry and threatened to set us in the stocks for landleapers and vagrants.

"Then we were afraid, so we stayed to question no more, but hastened northward, as fast as we could travel. And that was not fast, for I was sickening with a fever. So we came, as thou knowest, unto Larkland and oh! what a good rest I had that night, in a fair bed with sheets, and I dreamed my mother came unto me.

"But Claus was in great fear, for the lady of Larkland asked him many questions. And he, that knew little of English, and remembered the angry magistrate that had threatened us with the stocks, thought that harm was meant unto us. In the early dawn he roused me, saying that we must get thence. And I was stronger, for I had slept sweetly those hours, so I rose and went forth at his side.

"We were skirting the garden wall when we heard a rustling in a cherry tree above us. Claus hid him under some elder bushes that grew by the wall, but I — I was loath to hide. And then thou didst speak unto me, Merrylips, so winningly that it seemed to me I'd liefer than all the world stay there at Larkland. And I did hate to tell thee an untruth, indeed I did, but Claus was signing to me, where he lay hidden, so I promised falsely to await thee there.

"So soon as thou wert gone, we hastened away, and great part of the time Claus bore me in his arms. Then we learned that the lady of Larkland had sent to seek us and hale us back, so we were affrighted and hid us and travelled always by night till we were far away."

"Oh, Rupert!" cried Merrylips, for she could wait no longer with what she had to tell. "If thou hadst but been found that time and brought back unto Larkland, how well it would have been with thee! For Lady Sybil that is mistress of Larkland — canst thou not guess who she is?"

Rupert shook his head.

"No," he said, but he began to breathe fast, like a runner when he sees the goal.

"'Twas she that came to thy bed the night that thou didst dream thy mother stood nigh thee," Merrylips went on. "Rupert, in very truth, my dear god-

mother must be thy mother's sister and own aunt to thee."

Rupert clenched and unclenched his hands, and for a moment did not speak.

"Art thou sure?" he said at last. "How dost thou know? Don't jest with me, I pray thee!"

She touched the ring at her neck, and Rupert held out his that was like it.

"Nurse said 'twould be the ring would bring me to mine own!" he muttered.

"There were two rings," Merrylips poured out her story, "wrought by order of his Grace of Barrisden with the crest of the Fernefoulds, two hearts entwined. And one ring was given to his daughter, Lady Sybil, that is my godmother, and here it lieth in mine hand. And the other was given to his daughter, Lady Venetia, that married Captain Edward Lucas and went into Germany, where they both died of a fever, as my godmother hath told me. And her ring she left unto her little son, and thou dost hold it there, Rupert, and surely, by that token, thou art the Lady Venetia's child."

Then Rupert caught her hands in his and kissed them, though he did it roughly, as if he were not used to such courtesy.

"Thou dost believe me, dost thou not?" he kept repeating.

Merrylips was almost as wild as he. She forgot that an hour before she had been tired and hungry and discouraged. Over and over she said how glad she was, how glad Lady Sybil would be, how, when they came to Walsover, Rupert would be welcomed by every one, and would have his rightful name and place, and never again be poor and friendless and unhappy.

But while Merrylips talked on, Rupert's face grew sober and more sober. At last he checked her, though gently.

"But I must tell thee, Merrylips," he said hesitatingly. "'Twill not be so easy as thou dost think, and as I did think when I was a little boy. For after we fled from Larkland, we came unto Oxford, and there I took courage to tell my story once again unto a great magistrate.

"This magistrate asked me questions: what was my father's Christian name? what was my mother's surname ere she was married? And I could not tell him, nor where I was born, nor by whom christened. And when I showed him the ring, he said, how could I prove that it had not been stolen and given to me, a peasant boy, to bring into England, if haply I might win money with a lying tale of my gentle birth. And he called me impostor and bade me begone out of Oxford, and threatened to take the ring from me.

"So after that we said no more, Claus and I, for indeed it seemed hopeless. And we went into the king's army to win us bread till one day when I was older perhaps men would listen to me, or perhaps I might learn something further of my lost kinsfolk."

"And so thou hast to-day!" cried Merrylips.

"Ah, but will they believe me?" asked Rupert, wistfully. "Thou dost believe me, Merrylips, for thou art the kindest and truest little maid in all the world, and thou knowest I do not lie to thee. But will the grown folk believe me — thy godmother, and thy father, and thy brothers? Oh, Merrylips, dost think in truth that they will believe that I am son to Captain Lucas?"

For one instant Merrylips hesitated. They were strange folk indeed, the grown folk. Even dear Lady Sybil had thought Claus and Rupert spies when they came, sick and weary, to Larkland. Even her brother Munn had looked on and smiled at the distress of the poor people at Storringham. They did not always believe and pity so quickly as did she, who was young and foolish. Maybe they would treat Rupert as that heartless magistrate at Oxford had treated him.

But then Merrylips met Rupert's eyes, that had grown miserable with doubt in the moment while he saw her hesitate. So she hesitated no more. Laughing, she rose to her feet, and drew him up by the hand.

"Word a' truth!" she cried in her stoutest voice. "They shall believe thee, Rupert. Come, let us be off this hour unto Walsover! They shall believe that thou art my godmother's nephew that was lost. And if they do not believe at first, why, Rupert, somehow we will win them to believe!"

CHAPTER XXVII

HOW RUPERT WAS TOO CLEVER

After all the wonders of the last hour, Merrylips and Rupert were keyed high with excitement. They felt as if they could walk right along and never tire until they came to Walsover. But before they had gone a mile they found that Master Robert Lucas and Mistress Sybil Venner were just as hungry and footsore as those little ragamuffins, Rupert Hinkel and Tibbott Venner, had ever been.

They sat down at last under a hedge. Rupert pulled off his doublet and folded it about Merrylips, though she begged him keep it for himself.

"I am hardier than thou," he said. "And I must care for thee tenderly, since thou art a little maid."

"But I'm a boy," Merrylips answered. "Munn bade me be a boy, and so I still must be, unto all save thee, until I come among mine own people. So do not thou fret thyself for me, Rupert, for I am not cold nor am I overweary."

They sat side by side and hand in hand while the twilight closed round them. Across the sombre fields

they saw the small lights of a village kindle one by one. Then suddenly Rupert slapped his knee.

"I've a plan!" he cried.

Off he posted, and Merrylips was left alone in the dark. She watched the stars shine out above her, and called them by the names that Lady Sybil had taught her. Then she thought of Lady Sybil and of the joy that would be hers, when she saw her lost nephew. And in that thought she almost forgot that she was cold and hungry.

It was late in the evening and the village lights were dimmed, when Rupert came stumbling back across the fields.

"Here's bread," he panted, "a huge crusty piece, and a bit o' cold bacon, and two great apples, and I've a ha'penny besides, and one on 'em gave me a sup of ale, but that I might not bear away. Now eat of the bread, Merrylips. Eat all thou wilt, for to-morrow we'll have more."

"But how didst thou come by it, Rupert?" she asked.

"Honestly, I warrant thee," he said, and then he laughed in a shamefaced manner.

"I went unto the village alehouse, and I sang for the greasy clowns were sitting there. At Monksfield the officers said that I was a lusty lad at a catch. So

when I sang and spoke up saucily, these rude fellows gave me of their food. So thou seest," he ended, "I've sung for thee at last, Merrylips, though at Monksfield I would not do't for the asking."

Rupert joked and laughed about it bravely. But Merrylips knew that, in plain words, he had gone a-begging to get food for them.

It was the first time, even in his rough life, that Rupert had had to do a thing that was so hateful to his pride, but it was not the last time. They had to have food, those two poor little travellers, and they had no money with which to buy it. So time after time Rupert did the only thing that he could do. He slipped into a farmyard or a lonely alehouse, and there, with his songs and his pert speeches, he got now a piece of bread, and now a ha'penny, and now, far oftener than he told Merrylips, only cuffs and curses for his pains.

While Rupert went on these risky errands, Merrylips hid in the fields. But one afternoon, when she was seated under a straw-stack, she was found by the surly farmer that owned the field. He shook her as soundly as ever a little boy was shaken, and threatened to set his dog upon her. After that Rupert thought it best not to leave her alone, but to take her with him wherever he went.

He was sorry to do this. He feared that she might be hurt or frightened by the rough men among whom he had to go. He feared too lest the sight of such a young lad as she seemed, might make people ask questions. And just then he was very eager to escape notice.

They were now drawing near to the rebel lines, which they must cross, if they would ever reach Walsover. To north of them lay the town of Ryeborough, which was held for the Parliament by Robert Fowell, Lord Caversham. It was a walled town with a castle, — a strong place, from which bands of rebels went scouting through the countryside.

This much Rupert had learned in the alehouses. And he and Merrylips remembered, too, that it was from Ryeborough that men and guns had been sent to the siege of Monksfield. They feared the very name of the town, and they would have been glad to slip from one hiding-place to another, and never show themselves to any one, till they had left it long miles behind them.

But they could not keep on marching, unless they had food to eat. And in order to get food, they must go where people were. And since the cross farmer had frightened Merrylips, they felt that they must go together. So after some hours of hunger they screwed

up their courage, and late of a chill afternoon limped, side by side, into a hamlet of thatched cottages that was called Long Wesselford.

"Be not feared!" Rupert whispered to Merrylips, as they passed slowly down the village street. "There are no soldiers here, for I questioned yesternight at the alehouse. Indeed I have been wary! Now do thou keep mum and let me talk for both. And perchance, an we get a penny, we'll spend it for a night's lodging, and lie beneath a roof for once."

"That would like me mightily!" sighed Merrylips.

In spite of herself she shivered in her worn clothes. Up to that time the weather had been mercifully mild, but now the night was falling wintry cold. The puddles in the road were scummed with ice, and in the air was a raw chill that searched the very marrow of the bones.

Halfway down the street the two children found that a stone had got into Merrylips' shoe. So they sat down on the doorstep of a cottage that was larger than the others, while Rupert untied the shoe-lace and shook out the stone. They were just ready to rise and trudge on, when behind them they heard the door of the cottage flung open.

Out stepped a big, blowzy young woman that made Merrylips think of Mawkin. Before they could rise and run away, she was bending over them.

"Whither beest thou going, sweetheart?" she asked Merrylips.

Rupert looked surprised. You may be sure that he was not spoken to in that kindly way, when he went alone into the village alehouses! But Rupert was almost thirteen, and looked a hardy little fellow, while Merrylips, in her ragged boy's dress, did not seem over nine years old, and she looked tired and piteous besides.

So the blowzy woman did perhaps what any woman would have done, when she took Merrylips by the hand and drew her into the cottage. Merrylips went meekly, because the woman was so large and determined, and Rupert went because Merrylips went.

Almost before they knew how they had come there, they both were seated in a warm chimney-corner, in a well-scoured kitchen. They had a big bowl of porridge to share between them, and the blowzy woman and her old father, who had sat nodding by the fire, were asking them a heap of questions.

Merrylips ate the hot porridge in silence, but Rupert told the story that he had planned to tell.

"My name is called Hal Smith," he said glibly, "and this is my cousin John. And we were put to school down in the Weald of Sussex, but we are fain to fight the—the Cavaliers—" he tried hard to say "wicked Cavaliers,"

but in that he failed utterly — "so we have quitted the school and are bound unto the army."

"Lawk! The brave little hearts! Didst ever hear the like?" cried the woman, and filled their bowl afresh.

But the old father chuckled.

"Runaways, I's wager!" said he. "Pack 'em back to their schoolmaster, Daughter Polly."

Of such a danger Rupert had never dreamed. For the first time he saw now that any grown folk would surely try to send them back to the school about which he had made up his clever story. He had told one fib from choice, and he found now, as often happens, that he must tell many more from necessity.

"Nay, we are no runaways," he said, and he spoke fast and trembled a little. "Our cousin Smith hath sent for us — he that is our guardian. He is with the Parliament army. 'Tis to him we are going."

"And where might 'a be serving, this kinsman Smith ye speak of?" croaked Polly's old father.

Rupert wished to answer promptly, as if it were the truth that he told. So he spoke the first word that came into his head.

"At Ryeborough," he said. "'Tis at Ryeborough our kinsman Smith doth serve. Ay, and we must lose no time in going unto him. Come, up wi' thee, John, and let us trudge!"

He slipped from his seat, and caught Merrylips' hand. He was no less eager than she to be safe out of the cottage.

But as the two children rose, they saw, for the first time, a tall young man in a smock frock, who was standing in the outer doorway. He must have heard every word that they had said, for he and the blowzy woman, Polly, were looking at each other wisely.

"Didst hear him say Ryeborough, Brother Kit?" cried Polly. "'Tis happy chance they came to us this hour, poor dears!"

"Ay, happy chance indeed!" the young man said, and clapped Rupert on the shoulder.

"Come, my fine cock!" he cried. "What say ye to riding to your journey's end, instead of shogging on your two feet?"

"I — I would be beholden unto no one!" stammered Rupert, in great alarm. "Let us go, sir!"

He fairly pleaded, and Merrylips, who was frightened to see him frightened, bit her lip and tried not to cry.

"Thou seest, Kit, the little one is near forspent, poor lamb!" said kindly Polly, and stroked Merrylips' tumbled hair.

"Don't 'ee be afeard now, pretty!" she comforted. "'Tis no trouble ye'll be to my brother Kit. He is drawing two wain-loads of horse-litter to Ryeborough

this night. He'll find space to 'stow ye in the wain, all snug and cosey, and in the morn ye'll be safe with your cousin Smith."

"I ha' seen him in Ryeborough market-place," said Kit. "Smith! 'Tis a thick-set fellow, and serveth in my lord's own troop of carabineers."

When Rupert and Merrylips heard this, they were filled with terror. But they had to look pleased. They dared not do anything else. If they were to say now that they did not wish to go to Ryeborough, that they had no kinsman named Smith, and that all of Rupert's story was a lie, they were sure that they should suffer some dreadful punishment.

In sorry silence they took the penny and the gingerbread that kind Polly gave them. They shuffled out into the raw, chill twilight of the street. They found that already the great wains had rumbled up and were halted at the door. They saw no help for it, so they let themselves be lifted up by Brother Kit and the stout carters, and placed among the sheaves of straw beneath an old horse-blanket.

"Have an eye to 'em, Kit Woolgar!" Polly called from the doorway, where she stood with a cloak wrapped about her. "And don't 'ee let 'em down till 'ee come to Ryeborough, else they'll perish by the way."

And to Rupert and Merrylips she called: —

"Good speed to ye, Hal Smith, and little John! Your troubles all are ended now, dear hearts!"

But Rupert and Merrylips, with their faces turned to the dreaded town of rebel Ryeborough, thought that in very truth their troubles were just beginning.

CHAPTER XXVIII

IN THE ENEMY'S CAMP

WHILE the wain jolted through the stiffening mire, Rupert and Merrylips whispered together. They agreed that at the first chance they would scramble down noiselessly from the wain and run away, before Kit Woolgar could stop them. But they would not make this brave dash just yet, for a great white moon was staring in the sky, and the road was running through open fields, where they might easily be seen and hunted down.

"We will wait," said Rupert, "till the night weareth late and is dark, and the carters are sleepy and forget to watch us. No doubt, too, the road will lead presently among trees, where we may hide ourselves. Ay, we shall do wisely to wait."

That would have been a very prudent course, but for one thing, on which Master Rupert had not counted. Late in the evening, when the moon was setting, and the time for escape seemed near at hand, they came to a crossway. There they were joined by three more wains, and guarding these wains, and ready to guard them, too, was a little squad of Roundhead troopers.

RUPERT AND MERRYLIPS KNEW IT WAS USELESS TO THINK OF ESCAPE.

While those big, grim men rode alongside the wains, Rupert and Merrylips knew that it was useless to think of escape. So they gave up hope, and cuddled down amongst the straw, beneath the horse-blanket.

They wondered, in whispers, what they should do next day when they were handed over to the thick-set Smith, who served at Ryeborough. Surely, they should be known at once as no kinsmen of his! Then perhaps they should be judged to be spies, because they had told false stories. And spies — were not spies always hanged?

In their fright they thought that they should lie awake till daybreak. But they were so tired that they were lulled by the padding of the horse-hoofs and the creaking of the wheels. And before they knew it, they both fell fast asleep.

When they woke, a cold, wintry light was gleaming all about them. The wain in which they sat was just rumbling over a bridge. Beneath the bridge ran black water, which all along its banks was fringed with crispy ice. At the farther end of the bridge the stone walls of a castle stood up grimly against the sky.

"'Tis Ryeborough!" whispered Rupert. "And 'tis neck or nothing now! So soon as we are set upon the ground, we must run for't!"

They passed through a narrow, arched gateway

in the massive wall, where sentinels kept watch. They came into a steep street, which ran between high houses that shut out the sun. Up one street and down another they rumbled.

Everywhere, it seemed to them, they saw soldiers, on foot and on horseback, officers and men. They heard, now near, now far, the blare of trumpets and the roll of drums. On the footway girls went laughing by, and at their breasts they wore knots of orange ribbon, the color of the Parliament. Always the great bulk of the castle loomed against the sky, and from its highest tower drooped a banner that in the sunlight gleamed the hue of orange.

In the very heart of the rebel town, after so many twistings and turnings that it was hard to say how they had come there, the wains halted in a dirty courtyard, near some gaunt stables. The soldiers of the escort swung heavily from their saddles. The carters clambered down and began to unhitch the steaming horses.

"Down wi' ye, lads!" sang out Kit Woolgar, cheerily. "Else ye'll be cast into the stalls forthwith!"

All a-tremble, Merrylips clambered over the trusses of straw and let herself down into Woolgar's arms.

"Nigh frozen, art thou?" the young man said. "Do 'ee but wait, and speedily I'll get thee a swig of something hot, my youngster."

As he spoke, Woolgar took his hand from Merrylips and turned to look to his horses. In that moment Rupert caught her arm.

"Run!" he whispered. "Quick! 'Tis our one chance."

Like frightened hares they darted toward the entrance of the courtyard. They slipped on the frosty cobbles. They stumbled, for they were cramped and stiff with lying still so long. Behind them they heard men shout, and at that sound they ran the faster.

Outside the gate they dived into a narrow alley. At the farther end was a wall, over which they flung themselves. Beyond the wall were squalid courts, and frost-nipped gardens, and walls, and more walls.

At last they halted in a damp courtyard. They were too spent to run a step farther. They crept into a great empty cask, which lay on its side among some rubbish against a blank wall. There they crouched and waited, while they listened for the coming of pursuers.

They heard no sound, but long after they had got breath again they stayed in their hiding-place. They ate Polly Woolgar's gingerbread, and still they were very hungry. They found it cold, too, in that damp court. And because they were hungry and cold they could not stay there forever. About the middle of the

afternoon they crawled out of the cask, and with hearts in their mouths stole into the streets of the rebel town.

"If we ask questions," said Rupert, "they'll know us for strangers. So we'll make as if we knew the way, and stroll about like idle boys, and in time we'll hit upon a gate. And then mayhap we can slip through it into the open country."

Merrylips smiled unsteadily. She felt as if she could not breathe until she was outside of the rebel town. She kept tight hold of Rupert's hand, and whenever they met a Roundhead soldier, pressed closer to Rupert's side.

They had threaded a maze of little lanes that were overhung with dingy houses, and now they came into the pale sunlight of an open space. In the middle of this space stood a market-cross, and at the right a steep street wound upward to the castle.

"Sure, here's the centre of things!" Rupert began joyfully. "Now I will take my bearings. Cheerly, Merrylips! We'll soon be clear o' this coil."

Right in the middle of his brave words, he stopped, with his lips parted and his eyes wide. Merrylips looked up in great fright. There by the market-cross, not twenty paces from them, a group of men were lounging, and one of them was a tall young fellow in a smock frock.

"'Tis Kit Woolgar himself!" whispered Rupert. "Quick, ere he see us! Turn in at this door!"

Right beside them, as Rupert's quick eye had noted, a door stood open. Over it hung a board, on which was painted a spotted dog, and a bush of evergreen, which meant that wine was sold inside. The house was a tavern, then, and it was called the Spotted Dog. A rough place it seemed, but Rupert and Merrylips were glad of any port in storm.

Hurriedly they turned in at the open door. They went down a flagged passage. They stepped into a low-ceiled taproom. There, on benches by the fire, lounged a half-dozen burly musketeers, who wore the colors of the Parliament.

At the mere sight of the enemy, Merrylips shrank back, but Rupert tightened his hold on her hand. He knew that there was no retreat for them now. With head up, he marched across the sanded floor, and halted at the bar.

"A penny 'orth o' beer, sirrah, and see that thou dost skink it handsomely!" he said to the tapster, in his most manlike voice.

Some among the soldiers chuckled, and the tapster grinned, as he handed Rupert the can of beer for which he had called. But Rupert bore himself manfully. He clanged down the one penny that Polly had given

him, and then he strode to a bench. There he sat down and made Merrylips sit beside him.

"Drink slowly," he bade beneath his breath. "By the time we are done, Kit Woolgar haply will be gone, and we can slip forth again in safety."

But Merrylips had scarcely taken a sup of the beer, when one of the soldiers sauntered toward them.

"By your coat, master, I judge ye are come hither to join our ranks," he said.

His voice was grave, but his eyes were laughing. Clearly he did not think Rupert so much of a man as Merrylips thought him.

Rupert flushed and took a swallow of beer, and Merrylips hung her head, but they could not hope to escape by keeping silent. The soldiers were idle and ready for sport. So they began to chaff the two children, roughly, but not altogether ill-humoredly. Like it or not, Rupert had to answer, but after his experience at Polly Woolgar's he was slow to make up stories.

"We are come hither to fight, yes," he muttered. "To fight for the Parliament."

"Good Parliament men, eh?" struck in one hulking fellow.

All of a sudden he caught Merrylips by the shoulders and stood her on her feet. He thrust the can of beer into her hands.

"Where's your civility, bantling?" said he. "Will ye wet your throat, and never a pious wish for the cause ye follow? Drink it off, come! Heaven speed the Parliament, and down wi' the wicked king!"

Merrylips had raised the can to her mouth. She was too startled to dream of anything, except to obey. But as she heard those last words, she stopped and across the rim stared at the man.

She had thought that she was going to drink. She feared that Rupert, who spoke so glibly of fighting for the Parliament, might think it like a girl, if she should refuse. But, in that second, while she faced the big musketeer in that dingy taproom, she seemed to stand in her own chamber at Larkland, in the fair days before ever Will Lowry came, and she seemed to hear Lady Sybil speak: —

"I would have thee more than a man, my Merrylips. I would have thee a gentleman."

A gentleman! Surely a gentleman would not deny the cause that he served, no, not even to save his life!

Merrylips breathed fast. She felt the heart leaping in her throat, but she thought of Lady Sybil.

"I cannot drink it, sir! I will not drink!" she cried, and let the can fall clattering from her hold.

"Will not?" the fellow shouted.

She felt his grasp tighten on her arm. She knew

that he meant to strike her. But before the blow had time to fall, Rupert had thrust himself in front of her.

"Do not you touch him!" he cried in a quavering voice. "'A is too little! Ye shall not touch him."

"Let the brat drink that pledge. 'Tis a good pledge!" cried one.

"Faith, you shall drink it yourself, you pestilence meddler!" said the fellow who had first laid hold of Merrylips.

He turned from her and caught Rupert by the arm. Some one gave him a cup of ale, and he thrust it into Rupert's hand.

"Down with it!" he ordered. "Drink! To the devil wi' false King Charles!"

Rupert had talked lightly enough of how he should pass himself off for a Roundhead. But now that the time had come, he hesitated. Then his face turned gray and set, as it had been on the day when Lieutenant Digby had bidden him sing.

"Drink!" the Roundhead bade again.

"I'll see you dead first!" Rupert cried. "I am no rebel!"

Merrylips threw her arm across her eyes. In very truth she thought that Rupert would be killed. She heard men cry out, and she heard them laugh. The

SHE STOPPED AND ACROSS THE RIM STARED AT THE MAN.

sound of their laughter seemed to her more terrible than any threats.

One shouted, "Make him drink now!"

Then Rupert cried shrilly, "Away wi' thee, Merrylips! Run! The window!"

Right beside Merrylips a casement stood open. She looked toward it, but she did not stir. She wondered how Rupert could think that she would run away and leave him.

Beyond the casement she saw the sun slanting peacefully upon the market-place, and through the sunlight she saw a horseman go ambling. He wore a bandage round his head, and in the strong light his chestnut hair was ruddy, like her brother Munn's.

It all happened in a second. Before the noise of laughter and Rupert's shrill cry had ceased, she had leaped on a bench beneath the window and cast herself over the sill. She fell upon the cobbles without. She sprang up and ran stumbling across the market-place.

As she ran, she screamed. She heard her own voice, thin, like a voice in a nightmare:—

"Dick Fowell! Oh, Dick Fowell! Help! Help! Help!"

CHAPTER XXIX

A FRIEND IN NEED

For a long time after, indeed until she was a grown woman, Merrylips used to dream of that run across the market-place. She would wake all breathless and trembling with fear lest she might not reach Dick Fowell.

Truly it seemed as if she never could make him hear. He was riding with his face to the front, headed for the street that led upward to the castle, and in the clatter of his horse's hoofs he heard no other sound.

But Merrylips screamed with all her might, and the men lounging by the market-cross raised their voices too, and some idle boys took up the cry. Through the haze that wavered before her eyes, she saw Fowell check his horse and turn in the saddle. She reeled forward, and caught and clung to his stirrup.

"Rupert! Rupert!" she wailed. "They're killing him — yonder at the Spotted Dog! Oh, they're killing Rupert!"

Somebody snatched her out of harm's way, as Dick Fowell swung his horse about. She saw him go gal-

loping across the market-place, and she staggered after him. She felt a grasp on her arm, and she saw that it was Kit Woolgar who was holding her up. But she was past being surprised or frightened at anything.

She did not remember how she had crossed the market-place. She was at the door of the Spotted Dog, and beside it she saw Dick Fowell's horse, with the saddle empty and a potboy holding the bridle. She was stumbling down the flagged passage. She had pitched into the taproom. There, on a bench, in the midst of the little group of musketeers, who were far from laughing now, sat Dick Fowell, and Rupert leaned against his arm.

Rupert was white about the mouth, and he had one sleeve torn from his doublet. He was drinking from a cup that Fowell held to his lips, and he steadied it with a hand that shook a great deal. Between swallows he caught his breath, with a sobbing sound.

Merrylips ran to his side and threw her arms about him.

"I thought they would ha' slain thee!" she gasped.

"They did — no such thing!" answered Rupert, jerkily.

He shifted himself from Dick Fowell's hold and sat up, with his arm about her.

"And I blacked — one fellow's eye for him — the

scurvy rogue! And I didn't — drink for none on 'em! And we're both — king's men!" he ended, lifting his face to Dick Fowell. "And you can hang us — if you will! And we're not afeard! And God save the king!"

"God save the king!" quavered Merrylips.

And then they clung to each other, and wondered what would happen to them.

Kit Woolgar began to talk, and the idlers and the tavern folk, who had crowded into the room, began to question and exclaim. But Dick Fowell bade them be silent, and in the silence he spoke briefly to the musketeers. Merrylips hoped that never in her life should she be spoken to by any one in a voice like that. When he had said the little that was to be said to men that found their sport in bullying children, he dismissed them, with a promise to speak further to their captain.

Then Fowell turned to Kit Woolgar and bade him tell his story. And Woolgar told how he had taken up the two children at Long Wesselford, and how they had slipped from him, and all the false tale with which they had cheated him. At that Merrylips remembered how kind Polly and Kit had been, and how she and Rupert had deceived them, and she blushed and hung her head for shame.

"Truth," said Fowell, when the tale was ended, "I must be that kinsman Smith whom these young ones sought in Ryeborough — eh, Tibbott Venner?"

"You're merry, sir," replied Woolgar. "You're no carabineer in my lord's troop. You're my lord Caversham's son, and well I know your honor."

"In any case," said Fowell, "I'll charge me with the custody of these two arrant king's men."

He gave Woolgar money for his pains in bringing the children thither. Then he picked Merrylips up in his arms, and bidding Rupert follow, walked through the midst of the people and out of the tavern. There in the market-place he hailed a mounted trooper who was passing.

"Take this boy up behind you," he said, pointing to Rupert, "and follow me unto the castle."

Then he set Merrylips on his own horse and mounted behind her. In such fashion they all four headed up the narrow street, beyond the market-place, that led to the very heart of the rebel stronghold.

As they went, Fowell asked Merrylips to tell him truly how she came there, and she told him everything: how she and Rupert had been sent from Monksfield to save their lives on the eve of the last assault; how they had failed to get aid at King's Slynton; how they had wandered up and down the country; and by what

bad luck they had been sent to Ryeborough, where of all places in the world they least wished to be.

"And we ha' walked so far, and fared so hard," she ended sorrowfully, "and now here we be, prisoners at the last."

"Sure, thou dost not think that I would be a harsh jailer unto thee, Tibbott?" Fowell asked.

Merrylips said "No!" but her voice was not quite steady.

This fine young officer, in his gay coat, with his sword swinging at his side, and his horse prancing beneath him, was very different from the broken, blood-stained fellow that she had tended in the wash-house at Monksfield. She could not be quite sure that he was indeed the same man and her friend.

It was useless for Dick Fowell to try to set her at ease. He talked of things that he thought might interest her. He told how he had been sent to Rye-borough, right after his exchange, to mend his broken head. He told her good news of her friends at Monks-field.

For after Colonel Hatcher had assaulted the house for two days, he had received unlooked-for orders to make terms with Captain Norris, so that he might be free to carry his Roundhead soldiers to another place, where they were sorely needed. So although Colonel

Hatcher had taken the house, he had taken it by treaty, not by assault. And he had granted honorable terms to Captain Norris and let him go away with his followers into the west. So very likely many of Merrylips' old friends had come alive and unharmed from the siege.

But even this good news Merrylips only half listened to. She was gazing up at the vast walls under which they rode and the gateways through which they passed. She shivered as she thought how like a prison was this great castle of Ryeborough.

Dick Fowell drew rein at last in a little gravelled court, in front of a great house. It would have been a pleasant dwelling-place, if the walls of the castle had not hemmed it round on every side. A serving-man came bustling to take the horse, another lifted Merrylips to the ground, and as Fowell himself dismounted, a corporal of dragoons hurried forward and spoke to him in a low voice.

Scarcely had Fowell heard three sentences when he laughed and glanced at Merrylips.

"Faith," said he, "this falleth pat as a stage-play! You say yonder, corporal?"

The man nodded, and pointed to the stone gate-house by which they had entered the court.

"Ten minutes hence, then," bade Fowell, "send him unto me in the long parlor."

When he had dismissed the corporal, Fowell took Merrylips by the hand, and motioned to Rupert to walk at his side.

"Since you are not afraid of what we may do to you," he said, smiling down at Rupert.

Neither Rupert nor Merrylips felt much like smiling, but they went obediently whither they were led. They entered the great house, and found themselves in a dim entrance hall, where one or two lackeys were loitering, and a trooper in muddy boots stood waiting on the hearth. At the farther end of the hall was a door, and when Fowell had brought them to it, he halted them on the threshold.

"Now wait you here like good lads for one minute," he said, "and seek not to run away a second time, for I am not Kit Woolgar."

He smiled as he said this, but there was something in his eyes that made even Rupert think it would not be well to disobey him.

So Rupert and Merrylips stood waiting, while Dick Fowell went into the next room. He left the door ajar behind him, and they could not help hearing something of what was said inside.

Almost at once they heard a woman cry indignantly: —

"Art thou stark mad, Dick? To think that I,

forsooth, would look upon a brace of wretched malignants that thou hast taken prisoner! Why hast thou brought such fellows hither? Is thy father's house to be made a bridewell?"

Then they caught the murmur of Fowell's words but not their sense, and after that they heard a girl's voice say: —

"Sure, Dick must have reason for this that he doth ask."

Then another merry young voice struck in: —

"Are these prisoners of thine very desperate rogues to look on, Dick?"

"Why," said Fowell, slowly, "they've neither of them shaved for some days, and they're travel-stained, and ragged thereto, yet I'll go bail they will not fright you sorely. Shall I bid them in, good mother?"

A nod of assent must have been given, for next minute, though no word had been spoken, Fowell pushed the door wide.

"Come you in, you two desperate malignants!" he said, and his eyes were dancing with the jest that he was playing upon his mother.

Rupert and Merrylips stole quietly into the room. It was a long parlor, with lozenge-shaped panes in the windows and faded tapestry upon the walls. Midway of the room, by a cheery fire, sat a portly, middle-

aged gentlewoman in a gown of silk tabby. Near her two young girls, with chestnut hair, were busy with embroidery frames.

At sight of the two children all three exclaimed aloud.

"Dick, thou varlet!" cried the old gentlewoman.

"Are these your ruffian Cavaliers?" said the elder, and taller, of the two girls.

But the younger, a sweet, rosy lass, of much the same age as Merrylips' own sister Puss, sprang to her feet.

"Why," she cried, "'tis surely the little lad whereof Dick told us — the child that tended him that black night at Monksfield. Oh, mother! Look at his shoes, all worn to rags! Oh, poor little sweetheart!"

She came straight to Merrylips, and bent and would have kissed her, but Merrylips threw up her elbow, just like a bad-mannered little boy. Somehow, before these folk, who were gentlewomen, like her godmother, she felt ashamed of her boy's dress, as she had never been among men, and she longed to hide her head.

While Merrylips stood shrinking at Rupert's side, she saw that Fowell whispered something to the older girl, who laughed aloud.

"Verily, thou art a gallant master of revels, Dick!" she cried, and in her turn came rustling to Merrylips.

"If thou wilt kiss me, master," she said, "I will tell thee something should please thee mightily. Guess

whom thou shalt see this hour — ay, this moment! And thank my brother for't."

Merrylips peered over her elbow at Dick Fowell.

"Oh, surely," she faltered, "'tis never —"

"Did I not tell thee I'd requite thy kindness, Tibbott?" said Dick Fowell. "Look yonder, laddie, and tell me have I kept my word?"

Merrylips saw the door to the parlor swing open. For a moment she dared not look. She was afraid that he who entered might not be the one whom with all her heart she prayed that she might see.

CHAPTER XXX

TO PUT IT TO THE TOUCH

At last Merrylips gathered courage to look. Then she saw that just inside the door stood a young man, who blinked as if he had newly come from a dark place.

He looked worn and tired. He seemed to have slept in his clothes. His coat, an old one, was too big for him, and his hair was dishevelled, and his face unshaven. But for all his sorry attire and his altered face, Merrylips knew him.

"Munn! Oh, my brother Munn!" she cried.

She flew across the room and cast her two arms about the young man, who caught her to him and crushed her in a grip that fairly hurt.

"Merrylips!" he said in a shaky voice. "'Tis never Merrylips! How comest thou here? Why art thou still in that dress —"

"I promised!" Merrylips answered. "I told no one, save only Rupert. I kept my promise, indeed I kept it, Munn!"

If Munn had been younger, Merrylips would have

thought that there were tears in his eyes, as he looked down at her.

"All these days," he said slowly, "among men — and used as a boy — and through my blame! Merrylips, thou poor little wench!"

"Come, come, Venner!" Dick Fowell's voice struck in, as he bent over the two. "Sure, man, your days in prison have clouded your wits. Do you not know your own brother, Tibbott?"

"Brother?" retorted Munn, in a high tone that sounded like his old self. "'Tis you are crazed, sir. This is my young sister, Sybil Venner."

Now if ever a young man who enjoyed surprising other folk, was neatly served, that young man was Lieutenant Dick Fowell. He stared at Merrylips, and rubbed his forehead, as if he could trust neither his eyes nor his ears.

The elder of the two girls broke into laughter and clapped her hands.

"Oh, Dick, thou shalt never hear the last of this!" she cried.

But the other girl looked at Merrylips, and she seemed ready to weep.

"Poor little lass!" she murmured.

Then up stood Lady Caversham, in her gown of silk tabby.

"Give that child unto me!" she said.

She came across the room and without asking leave of any one, took Merrylips out of Munn's arms.

Merrylips found herself sitting in Lady Caversham's lap, in a great chair by the hearth. The blaze of the fire winked and blurred through the tears that came fast to her eyes — why, she could not tell.

"Oh!" she said. "I'm glad Munn told you. I'm wearied o' being a boy. I'm a little girl — a girl!"

With that she dropped her head on Lady Caversham's kind breast and cried as in all her life she had never cried before.

When Merrylips next took note of what went on round her, the younger girl was kneeling by her and loosing the broken shoes from her feet. The older girl was hovering near with a cup of wine, and as for good Lady Caversham, in the pauses of soothing Merrylips as if she were a baby, she was scolding Munn. Munn looked puzzled, and Dick Fowell, who stood near him, had for once not a single word to say.

"Had you no wit at all?" said Lady Caversham to Munn. "Hush thee, precious child!" she spoke in quite a different tone to Merrylips. "To set this poor little tender maid in boy's dress and cast her among rude men! 'Tis all well now, poor little heart! Whilst you went about your riotous pleasures — "

At that Dick Fowell and Munn exchanged nervous grins. Lady Caversham was a good woman, but sorely misinformed, if she thought riotous pleasures were to be found in a Roundhead prison.

"No man can say what harm might have befallen her," Lady Caversham went on. "Cry, if 'twill ease thee, sweeting, but thou hast now no cause to weep! If you were son of mine, sirrah, I would cause you to repent this piece of stark folly. Come, honey, 'tis rest and quiet thou dost need."

Up got Lady Caversham, with Merrylips still clasped in her arms.

"Let me take him, mother," offered Dick Fowell. "Her, I should say."

Lady Caversham waved him aside.

"Methinks she hath been left long enough to the tendance of men," she said. "And blind as an owl thou must have been, Son Dick, not to have known her for a little maid."

So Merrylips was borne away. She would have been glad to speak further with her brother Munn, but she felt too tired to ask that favor. She let herself be carried to an upper chamber, and there she was undressed and bathed and wrapped in fresh linen and laid in a soft bed.

When she was cosey among the pillows, the older

girl, Betteris, brought her a goblet of warm milk, and the younger girl, Allison, fed her with morsels of white bread and of roasted chicken. They would scarcely let the waiting-women touch her. It seemed as if they could not do enough for the little girl who in pity had helped their brother Dick in his time of need.

Merrylips felt sure that now all would be well with her, and with Rupert, and with Munn. So she fell gently asleep, and when she woke, the sunlight was shining in the room.

Allison and Betteris came in to see her soon. When they found her awake, Allison brought her bread and honey, and milk to drink. She told her, while she ate, that a gown was being made for her from one that was her own, and to-morrow, when it was ready, she should rise and dress and run about once more.

While Allison was talking, Betteris came into the chamber again, and with her was Munn. Only he was now clean and shaven and wore a coat of Dick Fowell's and a fresh shirt, so that, for all that his face was thinner than it used to be, he looked himself again.

Presently the two young girls stole from the room, and Merrylips and Munn were left together. What a talk they had, while he sat upon the bed and held her two hands fast, as if he were afraid to let her go!

Munn told Merrylips how he and Stephen Plasket had been made prisoners at Loxford, and how troubled he had been for her, when he thought about her, there at Monksfield, with never a friend to help her. In the hope of getting to her, he and Stephen had tried to escape, when they were being taken under guard to London. Stephen had got away, but he himself had been retaken. After that he had been closely guarded, and not over-tenderly treated, Merrylips guessed, but of that part Munn would not speak.

Then he told her how puzzled he had been, when an order came to the prison where he had been placed that he should be sent to Ryeborough. He confessed that he had been much afraid lest he should be brought before Will Lowry, and made to answer for carrying off Merrylips and using Herbert so roughly.

In that fear he had passed several unhappy hours, a prisoner in the gatehouse of Ryeborough castle. And then he had been ordered into the long parlor, and there he had found Merrylips.

"A rare fright Lieutenant Fowell set me in, with all this precious mystery," Munn grumbled. "But of a truth I owe him too much to grudge that he should have his sport. For he is right friendly, thanks to his old comradeship with Longkin and the affection that he hath to the little lad he thought thee. So he holdeth

me here, a prisoner on parole, and through my lord Caversham thinketh soon to give me in exchange for one of their own officers."

In her turn Merrylips told Munn all her adventures and all the kindness that she had met with at Monksfield. She told him everything, except the greatest thing of all — that Rupert was nephew to Lady Sybil Fernefould.

For when Merrylips spoke Rupert's name, and asked how he fared, and why was he not come, too, to speak with her, Munn stiffened a little. In a careless voice he said: —

"That little horseboy, Hinkel? Ay, to be sure, he hath served thee fairly. A brisk lad, no doubt! Our father will reward him handsomely."

So Merrylips said no more about Rupert. But after Munn had left her, she thought about him. She wondered, with a sinking heart, if indeed Rupert had been in the right, when he had said it would be hard work to make the grown folk believe his story.

While she lay wondering, and perhaps dozing a little, in bustled pretty Betteris Fowell.

"Art waking, Tibbott-Merrylips?" she cried. "Then art thou well enough to rise? Here's my father is fain to have a sight of the little maid that footed it, like a little lad, from Monksfield unto Ryeborough."

"But I've no clothes," Merrylips said sadly, for indeed she longed to get up.

"And so said my sister Allison and my lady mother," Betteris replied. "But my father said surely thy boy's dress was seemly to-day as it was yesterday, and vowed he'd see thee in that same attire. So up with thee, and be a lad again!"

Now that she was well rested, Merrylips thought it would be sport to be a boy once more, for a little while. She scrambled laughing from the bed, and as if it were a masking frolic, she dressed, with Betteris to help her. She put on a little clean smock and stockings, and the ruddy brown doublet and breeches. They had been neatly brushed, so that they did not look so much like the clothes of a beggar child. Last of all, she put on her warlike little leather jerkin, and then she felt herself a lad again.

Quite gallantly, Merrylips left the chamber at Betteris's side, but on the staircase she paused.

"Where is Rupert?" she said. "For 'twas Rupert brought us hither. He found the way, and won us food, and was brave when the soldiers did affright us. Surely, my lord, your father, is more eager to see Rupert than to look on me."

At first Betteris seemed likely to laugh and say nay, but when she looked at Merrylips' earnest little face, she changed her mind.

"It shall be as thou wilt," she said, and bent and kissed her.

So they waited in the hall, while a servant fetched Rupert from the kitchen. He came almost at once, and he was clean and brushed and had new shoes, but he was shyer and more sullen than Merrylips remembered him. He did not even offer to take her hand.

Betteris led them to an open door. Beyond it stood a screen of carved wood.

"My father sitteth yonder at dinner," she said. "Come thy ways in, Merrylips, and fear not, for he is a kind soul."

And then she added, in a little different tone, to Rupert: —

"Come you, too, boy!"

Rupert hung back.

"My lord doth not wish to see me," he muttered. "Let me be gone whence I came."

"Why, go, an thou wilt, sirrah," said Betteris, lightly.

But Merrylips caught Rupert's hand.

"No, no!" she cried. "Rupert, 'tis as well now as any time, since she doth say my lord is kind. Oh, Rupert, come with me, and we will tell him who thou art, and haply he will believe us."

"Dost thou dare?" said Rupert, breathlessly.

In Merrylips' eyes he saw that indeed she did dare. So he too lifted his head, and they walked bravely into Lord Caversham's presence.

CHAPTER XXXI

AT LORD CAVERSHAM'S TABLE

As soon as Merrylips had passed beyond the carved screen, she was sorry for her rash promise. She did not wish to tell Rupert's story, then and there. For she found herself in a great vaulted room, where serving-men moved softly to and fro, and at a long table, in the middle of the room, was seated what seemed to her a great company.

Lady Caversham was there, and Allison, and Dick Fowell, and a young man so like him that he must be a brother, and Munn, and a gentleman in a chaplain's dress, and two other gentlemen, who seemed rebel officers. But though Merrylips was startled by the sight of all these people, she forgot them in a second, when she looked at the head of the table, for there sat the man who she knew must be Lord Caversham.

His Lordship, the Roundhead governor of Ryeborough, was not at all the lank, close-cropped churl that Merrylips' friends at Monksfield would have made her believe. He was a burly, broad-shouldered gentleman, with iron-gray hair, which he wore as long

as any Cavalier, and warlike mustachios. His doublet was of murry-colored velvet, and his linen of the finest. Indeed, he looked like any great English gentleman, as he sat at his ample table, with his family and his friends about him.

While Merrylips noted all this and dared to hope that his Lordship might indeed prove kind, Betteris spoke aloud: —

"An't like you, sir, here is a young gentleman who is much at your service."

It was she that was spoken of, Merrylips knew. She saw that all were looking at her. She did not think it proper to courtesy, while she wore those clothes, so she stood up straight and saluted, as she had done at Monksfield.

She saw the men at table smile, and heard Lady Caversham murmur, "Dear heart!"

She saw, too, that Munn was watching her with a warning look to make sure that she bore herself as became a little sister of his. So she remembered to be neither too bold nor too timid, but like a little gentleman went to Lord Caversham, when he called her, and let him draw her to his side.

"Indeed thou art a little one!" said the Roundhead lord. "And thou hast walked that weary distance from Monksfield unto this town?"

"Ay, my lord," she said.

She was a little startled to find that all sat silent and listened to her.

"But indeed," she hastened to add, "'twas Rupert planned all for us both, and was right brave, and kind unto me."

"So! 'Twas Rupert, eh?" His Lordship smiled upon her. "And this is Rupert, I take it. Come here, lad!"

Rupert came as he was bidden, but he came unwillingly. He halted at Merrylips' elbow, and kept his eyes cast down, while he plucked at the hem of his worn doublet. Merrylips knew that he waited for her to speak, and with Munn looking on, she wondered if she dared.

"You're yourself but a young one," said Lord Caversham, in a kindly, careless voice. "A son to one of the troopers in the Monksfield garrison, they tell me."

Rupert looked up.

"No, my lord," he said.

Then he dared say no more, but with his eyes asked help of Merrylips. And she gave it. Even if twenty Munns had sat there, she would have given help in answer to such a look.

"Please you, my lord," she spoke out bravely, and

took Rupert's hand in hers, "he is no common trooper's lad. His true name is called Robert Lucas, and he is son to an English gentleman, one Captain Edward Lucas that died long since in camp in High Germany."

She had to stop then to draw breath, and she heard Munn cry sharply: —

"Merrylips! Good faith, where got you that crack-brained story?"

Then Munn added, more calmly: —

"Believe me, my lord Caversham, that boy yonder is a son or nephew or the like to one of mine own troopers, a Saxon fellow named Hinkel, and known as such to all the Monksfield garrison."

"Oh, but indeed thou art mistaken, Munn," pleaded Merrylips.

She could not keep her voice from shaking. For all those faces that had looked so kindly on her had now grown doubtful and impatient, and she was half afraid. But still she went on: —

"Rupert is truly son to Captain Lucas and to Lady Venetia that was my godmother's sister, and he hath a ring —"

"So you say, boy, those were your parents' names?" Lord Caversham asked sternly.

Rupert now was facing him steadily enough.

"My lord —" he began.

Then for a moment he hesitated. Indeed he would have been glad to claim the kindred that Merrylips had said was surely his! But he had to speak the truth, and he did it bravely.

"I know not the name of my father nor my mother," he said. "But my nurse said my father's name was Lucas, and he was a captain, and the rest — Merrylips knew the rest and told it unto me."

"Why, this is rare!" cried Dick Fowell, and he seemed angrier even than Munn himself. "Here's a complete trickster for so young a lad! So, you, sirrah, you've drained that little girl dry, and from her prattle have patched up this story of your great kin with which to cozen us."

The chaplain said that Rupert were best confess at once that he was telling a false story. Dick Fowell's brother swore that such a young liar deserved a whipping. Munn Venner, who was as loud as any, vowed that such a tale, of a lost child of Lady Venetia's, was too strange for belief. And all the time Merrylips and Rupert held each other fast by the hand and wondered what they should say next.

But in the midst of this clamor, Lord Caversham himself spoke out.

"When you lads are older," said he, — and even in her distress, Merrylips wondered to hear Dick Fowell

ON HIS BARED CHEST WAS A RED MARK LIKE A FRESH CUT.

and her brother Munn called "lads," — "you'll know that the stranger a story sound, the likelier it is to be the truth."

While Lord Caversham spoke, he put his arm about Rupert and drew him down to sit upon his knee. At this treatment Rupert stiffened and grew red, for he was not pleased at being handled like a little boy.

"Put back the shirt from your shoulder," my lord bade.

There was something in his tone that made Rupert obey in haste. He put back his shirt, with shaking fingers. Merrylips stood near enough to see that on his bared chest was a red mark like a fresh cut. And yet she knew that Rupert had not recently been hurt.

"Enough!" said Lord Caversham. "And you can sit quiet, my boy, for I've held you in my arms before this day, my godson, Robert Lucas."

CHAPTER XXXII

NEWS FROM LONDON

You may be sure that the rest of the dinner went that day untasted from Lord Caversham's table. For all who sat at the board forgot to eat, while they listened to the story, a strange one indeed, that my lord told, with his arm about Rupert's shoulders.

"Thirteen years ago come Eastertide," said my lord Caversham, "I was sent upon an embassy by the Elector Palatine, whose fortunes I followed, unto the Emperor Ferdinand. The country all was sore distressed with war. Armies of both parties, of the Emperor and of the Protestant princes, were marching to and fro. I was myself stayed, for want of fitting escort, at a town called Rodersheim, upon the borders of Bohemia.

"While I lay there, a battle was fought beneath the very walls of the town, wherein the Emperor's troops got the upper hand, but suffered heavy loss. Their wounded men were brought in sorry state into our town, which speedily was filled to overflowing.

A piteous sight it was to see those poor fellows dying, more than one, for mere lack of tendance!

"Now when night was falling on the groaning town, there halted at my door a rude country cart, in which lay a man who seemed near unto death, and a fair woman, who held his head on her knees and wept as one distraught. She made shift to tell me that she was born Venetia Fernefould, daughter to his Grace of Barrisden, and that the man she tended was her husband, Edward Lucas, a captain in the Emperor's service.

"She had been with him on this expedition, and when the battle was over, she had sought and found him amid the slain. She had given all that she had to some country folk to fetch him in that poor cart unto the town. But now that she had brought him thither, she could find neither roof to shelter him, nor surgeon to dress his hurt. So she had sought me, as a fellow-countryman, and she prayed me, in the name of our common English blood, to give her husband succor.

"Thus Captain Lucas and Lady Venetia, his wife, found harborage in my quarters. He was sore wounded indeed, with a great sword slash in the breast and shoulder, yet against all expectation he made a happy recovery. This was thanks partly to his own great

vigor, and more, perhaps, to the loving care that his wife spent upon him.

"While Lucas lay upon his bed of sickness, his son was born, there in my quarters. I myself, as nearest friend to the poor parents, had him christened and called him Robert, and stood sponsor for him. 'Twas in those days I saw the red mark on his breast and shoulder — the seal that his birth had set upon the lad, as it seemeth now, for his later happiness.

"Now when my godson was a month old, Captain Lucas was well recovered. He went his way with his wife and child, and I went mine upon my embassy, and never again did I set eyes on any of the three until this hour. For though much kindness had been between us and affection, — for Lucas was a gallant fellow, and his wife was one to win all hearts, — yet so distracted was the country that there was little sending of letters, or hope that friend might hear from friend.

"'Twas only through roundabout channels that I learned, near two years later, that Lucas and his sweet lady, who was ever at his side, had perished months before of a fever that had swept their camp. And I made no doubt but that their little child had died with them."

By this time, if Merrylips had been any but a sweet-tempered little girl, she would have been almost jealous

of Rupert. For her own adventures had quite paled beside this story of Captain Lucas's son, who had been so many years lost and was now so strangely found. She stood almost unheeded by Lord Caversham's chair, while the men asked Rupert questions, as if they were ready to believe him, at last.

Thus encouraged, Rupert told Lord Caversham all that he had told Merrylips, on that bleak day among the willows, and showed the ring that had been his mother's. And then Merrylips was bidden show her ring, and tell all that she had learned of the Lady Venetia's story.

"Mark it well," said Lord Caversham, when all had been told. "The lady's English kinsfolk knew only of two children of hers, that were dead in infancy. They had been told no word of the birth of this third child. No doubt letters were sent, and in the chances of war were lost. So there was none to seek and find this little waif, when his parents were taken from him.

"And when he came into England, a mere child, with no friend to help him save a thick-witted trooper who could scarce speak the English tongue, small wonder there was none to listen to him! Of a truth, godson," he ended, "'twas a happy wind that blew thee unto Ryeborough! I mistrust I am the only man in England, — nay, in all the world, perchance,

— that could piece together thy story and say with certainty that thou art thy father's son."

Then at last Lord Caversham let Rupert rise from his knee, but he still kept his hand upon him.

"Thou art a good lad of thine inches, Robert," said he, and then his eyes began to laugh, with just the trick that Dick Fowell's eyes had.

"Look you," he spoke, "now that my Dick is grown, I need a young lad to sit at my table and ride at my bridle-hand. What sayst thou, wife? Shall we keep this godson of mine and make a good Parliament man of him?"

Oh, but at that Rupert backed away quickly from my lord, and grew red to the roots of his hair!

"Ah, but, my lord," he said, "I am a king's man, like Merrylips and like Cornet Venner."

For the first time Munn's heart seemed to warm toward Rupert at those words.

"I do beseech you, my lord," Munn said, "let the boy go unto the Lady Sybil Fernefould, who is now dwelling in my father's house at Walsover. She is blood-kin to the lad, his own aunt, and will make him welcome unto her, I dare undertake."

"Ay, and make an arrant Cavalier of him, like all you Venners," my lord answered. "And if I refuse, no doubt, Cornet Venner, you will steal him away from

under my face and eyes, as you did your young sister here from Mr. Lowry's keeping."

Perhaps Munn did not know that so much of Merrylips' story had been told to Dick Fowell and his sisters, and through them had reached Lord Caversham. He grew quite red and flustered, and made no more suggestions.

For a moment Merrylips was quite alarmed. She thought that now that their only champion was silenced, Rupert would indeed be kept forever at Ryeborough castle. But she found that, after the fashion of grown folk, Lord Caversham was only jesting.

"Dick," he was saying next instant, quite soberly, "what sayst thou to a month's leave of absence? 'Twere well perhaps that thou shouldst go down into the west with these three lads."

Once more Merrylips was astonished to hear Munn thus lumped with her and Rupert, as if he were but a boy!

"Thou shalt lay open all the matter," went on Lord Caversham, "touching this boy's birth and kinship, to Sir Thomas Venner, and to Lady Sybil, even as I would do, could I myself go thither. And haply among the men that survived the assault of Monksfield they may find the trooper Hinkel, to tell his part in the story. For though this youngster might find it hard to prove

his claim to the name of Lucas in a court of law, 'tis his in right and justice, and so I will maintain. And for Ned Lucas's sake, I would fain see the child acknowledged by his kinsfolk."

"I'll do my best endeavor, sir," Dick Fowell promised. "So soon as you can get us safe conducts and arrange for Cornet Venner's exchange, we'll be off for Walsover."

At that Merrylips longed to cry "Hurrah!" as Tibbott Venner would have done. Indeed her face broke into smiles, as she looked at Rupert, and then at Lord Caversham. She would gladly have said that she was much beholden to him, but she feared to be too forward, with Munn looking on.

But Lord Caversham caught her eye. He was just asking kindly, "Wouldst thou say aught unto me, lad?" when a serving-fellow came to his side, and bent and whispered, and laid a packet in his hand.

"A messenger post-haste from London, eh?" said Lord Caversham.

With a grave face of business, such as he had not yet shown, he said, "By your leaves!" and opened and looked upon the letters that lay within the packet.

When he glanced up, he was smiling in a dry fashion, as if he were but one part mirthful and the other part vexed. He tossed the letters on the table.

"Here's like to be a merry meeting among kindred!" he cried. "Cornet Venner, you'll be blithe to know that your cousin, Will Lowry of Larkland, is riding hither, as fast as horse can bear him."

CHAPTER XXXIII

WESTWARD HO!

At the mere name of Will Lowry, Merrylips forgot the dress that she wore and forgot that she must be brave like a boy. She ran to her brother Munn, and creeping into the space between his seat and Dick Fowell's, clasped her arms tight about his neck.

"Sure, thou'lt never let them give me back to Mr. Lowry, Munn dear!" she begged. "For now 'twill be worse than ever at Larkland and they said when I was grown, I must marry Herbert, and I am fain to marry no one, never, and least of all Herbert, that is a mean coward. Oh, *best* Munn, prithee say that Mr. Lowry shall not take me! Say it, Munn!"

Poor Munn! He would have been more than glad to have said it, and to have made his promise good. But in a moment Merrylips herself realized that he was powerless to help her. He had no sword to wear like the other gentlemen. Even as herself he was a prisoner and helpless in Lord Caversham's hands.

She looked beseechingly at Lord Caversham. But my lord sat fingering the London letter, and Dick Fowell waited in silence on his father's pleasure. They wasted time, while she was sure that next moment Will Lowry would come marching in and carry her back to Larkland.

"Oh, Munn! Canst thou do naught to help me?" she cried in a heart-broken voice, and hid her face against his shoulder.

Then for the second time that portly Lady Caversham took charge of Merrylips' affairs. She rose from her seat, and came and laid one hand on Merrylips' head and the other on Munn's shoulder. Now that she saw how troubled he was for his little sister, she seemed ready to forgive him, both for having used the child so carelessly and for having himself fought upon the king's side.

"Have no fear, Merrylips," she said. "For thou shalt go unto thy kin at Walsover, ay, though twenty Lowrys were fain to stay thee. I promise it, and there's an end on't."

Munn caught my lady's hand and kissed it, and Merrylips clung to her. Between laughing and crying she tried to say how glad she was, how grateful she should always be!

"Come, little heart, and we will hit upon some

plan!" bade Lady Caversham, and led her from the room.

As Merrylips went with her, she heard Lord Caversham say: "Nay, if thou hast undertaken it, my wife, the plan is already as good as found, I warrant me!" and he laughed as he said it.

Indeed, matters went fast in the next hours, under Lady Caversham's rule. Merrylips lay in bed and rested, against a long journey. Meantime, Allison and Betteris flew in and out, and brought her tidings, and sweetmeats, and little clothes, which they tried upon her, and then snipped and stitched to suit her figure. But all the little clothes were boy's clothes.

"And am I never to be a girl again?" asked Merrylips, rather anxiously.

Betteris laughed and would have teased her. But gentle Allison made haste to tell her why the grown folk wished her still to wear her boy's dress and keep her boy's name.

"My father and Mr. Lowry, though not friends, are yet hand and glove in much business that pertaineth to the cause of the Parliament," said Allison. "So 'twere most unhappy, for divers reasons, if a breach were made between them, as there surely would be, were Mr. Lowry to find that his little ward was helped hence by my father's aid.

"So all our household are pledged to silence, touching the fact that Tibbott Venner is in truth the little maid Sybil. And my father truly can say that he never saw thee, save in boy's dress and bearing a boy's name. And in that name thy safe conduct will be made out, and thou shalt ride hence Cornet Venner's young brother, upon whom Mr. Lowry hath no claim."

"But surely when he seeth me, he will know me, whatever dress I wear," urged Merrylips. "And he is coming hither to seek me."

"Nay," cried Betteris, "'tis not to seek thy little self that Lowry is posting hither. He cometh on Parliament business. Perchance thou mightst even bide here, and he not spy thee, but 'tis too perilous for us to venture that. So to-morrow morn, when Mr. Lowry will ride in at the east gate, as his letter gave my father to know, thou shalt ride out at the west gate, and little Robert Lucas, and my brother, and thine own brother shall ride with thee. For my father will strain a point and set thy brother free on his own promise not to bear arms till an exchange may duly be arranged for him."

But for all that was said, Merrylips could not believe that it was true that next morning she should set out for Walsover. She let herself be fitted with the brave new clothes, which had been made for the young son

of one of my lord's officers. The doublet and breeches were of peacock blue, with silver buttons, and the cloak was lined with pale blue silk. She chatted with Dick's sisters, and ate and drank what was brought her. But all the time she felt as if she were moving in a dream.

It was like a dream, too, when she woke in the chill, black morning. She dressed by candlelight in the brave new clothes. She had boot-hose, and a plumed hat, and gloves of soft leather, all complete. Then she went down the long stair, at Allison's side, into the shadowy hall, and there she met with dim shapes, cloaked and booted, that she knew for her comrades. Here were Dick Fowell, and Munn, and Rupert. At first she scarcely knew Rupert, for he was a gallant little figure, all in fine new clothes of a deep crimson hue.

She drank a cup of steaming posset. She said farewell to Lady Caversham, and to Allison, and to Betteris. Lord Caversham she did not see again, for prudently he had no more speech with the sham Tibbott Venner.

Then she trudged forth with her companions, and was mounted on a horse, a little horse of her own, and away they rode from Ryeborough castle. And as she felt the brisk air upon her face and saw the wintry dawn break round her, Merrylips came broad awake. At last she knew that it was no dream, but that indeed she was riding home to Walsover.

Not till mid-morning, when Ryeborough and Will Lowry were miles behind them, did Dick Fowell give the word to draw rein at a village inn. There they rested and broke their fast. While Dick and Munn saw that the horses were well cared for, Merrylips and Rupert sat by the fire in the common room, and talked together.

"'Twas my godfather gave me these clothes," said Rupert. "And he bade me, if I was not made welcome amongst mine own kin, come unto him again. He is right kind. I be sorry now for the hard things I have said of all rebels, since he himself is one."

Then he sat silent and smoothed the silken lining of his doublet till he saw that Merrylips was watching him. He reddened, as if he were vexed with her and with himself that she should see how proud he was of his clothes, but next moment he said honestly: —

"Thou seest, these be the first garments ever I have worn were like a gentleman's. And oh! Merrylips —" he cast down his eyes and spoke fast — "thou art the only one in the world I would ask it of, but wilt thou not mark me, and when we are alone tell me whatever I have done amiss? For when I watch thee and thy brother, there's such a weary deal for me to learn! And for one thing," he ended, "maybe I should not 'thou' you, Merrylips."

She was sorry for Rupert, for she had never seen him in this humble mood. She could not be quick enough to cheer him.

"To be sure, I shall be right vexed with thee," she cried, "if thou dost call me 'you' so cold and formal. For we say 'thou' to those that we love, and thou and I, Rupert, are a'most kinsmen, and good comrades surely."

He smiled at her.

"That we are! And always shall be!" he said.

"And for the other matter," Merrylips added hastily, for she heard Dick and Munn coming down the passage, "I'll aid thee if I may in that, as in all else. But indeed they are but little things thou hast to learn, Rupert, and will come unto thee quickly."

So Merrylips did her best to teach Rupert to bear himself as became Captain Lucas's son, and Rupert, who was a quick-witted lad, learned when to pluck off his hat and bow, and how to walk into a room without blushing, and he stopped using some of the words that he had picked up in the camps.

When Dick and Munn saw what the children were about, they helped Rupert in many quiet ways. For as soon as Munn had grasped the fact that Rupert was not a little impostor, he was grateful to him for the care that he had taken of Merrylips. So he was

almost as kind as if Rupert had been his own young brother.

Like good comrades, then, the four went riding westward. They went in brave state, with a trumpeter and four men to attend them. They put up at snug inns, where they slept soft and ate and drank of the best,— how different from the last journey that Rupert and Merrylips had made! Sometimes they lay at fortified places, at first of the Roundheads and later of the Cavaliers, for they bore safe conducts and rode beneath a flag of truce.

They made short stages, for Rupert and Merrylips were but young riders. Sometimes, in cold or stormy weather, they lay by for a day or two. Thus it happened that it was hard December weather and almost Christmas time, when they came at last to the end of their journey.

All that afternoon they had ridden briskly. In rising excitement Munn and Merrylips had pointed out to each other the landmarks that they remembered. Merrylips was grieved to see that a farm-house by the road, where Mawkin's father had lived, was burned to the ground. She could scarcely believe Munn when he said that the Roundheads had done this.

For the first time she realized that the war had swept close to her own dear home. And she tried to fancy

what Walsover would seem like. For she knew that she should find it fortified with walls and ditches, just as Monksfield had been, and garrisoned with troops of soldiers.

While she thought about this change, they rode up the long slope of some downs, in the bleak yellow sunset light. On the road before them they saw the black bulk of a horseman against the sky. He had paused to watch them, and presently, as if he had seen their white flag, he rode to meet them.

Then Munn, who had ridden foremost all that day, raised a shout: —

"Crashaw! 'Truth, 'tis never Eustace Crashaw!"

He put his horse to the gallop, and when Merrylips and the others came up with him, they found him shaking hands and asking questions and giving answers, all in one breath, with the stammering lieutenant from the Monksfield garrison.

"Here's a r-rare meeting!" said Crashaw, and stammered more than ever. "R-renounce me, if ye have not l-little Tibbott with you! Now on my word, l-lad, Captain Norris will b-be blithe to see thee s-sound and well."

"And is Captain Norris here at Walsover, sir?" Merrylips asked in great surprise.

"Ay, that he is," Crashaw answered, "or will b-be

with the dawning. For after M-Monksfield fell, we were shuffled off into the w-west, and now at the l-last are joined to the Walsover garrison. Captain Brooke l-led one troop hither but this d-day, and t'other one is hard at our heels. So speedily your old friends will be here to w-welcome you."

"So!" said Dick Fowell, dryly, as they rode on once more. "Then I shall be fortuned to speak again with Lieutenant Digby?"

Merrylips' heart beat fast to hear him say this. She waited breathlessly for Crashaw's answer.

But Crashaw, who was a Romanist, crossed himself. Said he :—

"God r-rest him for a brave soldier! There is now no m-more to say of him."

Then Merrylips knew that Miles Digby had fallen in the fight at Monksfield. From the top of the down, which they now had gained, she could see the dear roofs of Walsover and faint lights gleaming through the dusk, but she saw them misted over with her tears.

"Oh!" she thought, "I would that I had shaken hands wi' him, since he did wish it, and 'tis now too late!"

CHAPTER XXXIV

JOURNEY'S END

But by the time that they had ridden down the long slope in the twilight, and reached the outermost of the barriers that now were built round Walsover, Merrylips' heart was light again. For she had before her a great happiness. Indeed, it was no small matter to come home at last, after two full years of absence.

They laid a plot in whispers, she and Munn, as they rode past the sentinels. Munn should present her to her father as a little boy, and see if he would recognize her. Then they should have sport in presenting her to each one of her kinsfolk in turn. Last of all, they should tell Lieutenant Crashaw that she was no boy, but a little girl.

"For 'tis clear he is so newly come to Walsover that he hath not yet had time to learn of our father which child of his was lost from Monksfield," Munn concluded.

He chuckled at the thought of the laugh that he should have at Crashaw. And truly it was a beautiful plot! But Dick Fowell could have warned the plotters that such surprises sometimes turn out unexpectedly for

their inventors. And so it proved with Munn and Merrylips.

Soon they had come into Sir Thomas Venner's presence. He stood, tall and martial, on the hearth in the great hall, ready to receive the envoy that had been sent to him under the white flag. And Munn played his part well. He greeted his father, with all respect and affection, and presented to him Lieutenant Fowell, as one to whom he was much bound in gratitude. Then he began soberly: —

"And, sir, I would further bespeak your kindness for this young lad —"

But there Merrylips spoiled everything. For as she gazed at her father, who was so big and strong and splendid in his officer's dress, she remembered that sad day, months ago, when she had parted from him. She felt that she could not bear it, even for a moment and by way of jest, to have him look at her as if she were a stranger.

So when Sir Thomas turned to look at the little boy of whom Munn had spoken, Merrylips ran to him and caught his hand.

"Daddy! Mine own daddy! Do you not know me, then?" she cried.

Well, for an instant he truly did not, and he was the more perplexed when Crashaw said kindly: —

"Sir, 'tis your s-son Tibbott."

"'Tis the first time ever I heard that I had such a son," Sir Thomas answered.

The way in which he said it was so like him that Merrylips laughed, only to hear him. And then, as he looked on her laughing face, a great light seemed to break upon him.

"Merrylips!" he shouted. "Good faith! And is it thou, brave little wench?"

Merrylips never heard what Lieutenant Crashaw said in the next few minutes to Munn, now that he knew the secret and how he and all Monksfield had been befooled. For she was swept up bodily into her big father's arms, and when next she was stood upon her feet, it was in the west parlor that she remembered.

It was the very room where long ago her mother had told her the dreadful news that she was to be sent to her unknown godmother at Larkland. The parlor had been green that day with the shadows of the vines, but now it was cheery with candles and with firelight. A group of gentlewomen in silken gowns were seated there, and a stout handmaid was in attendance on them.

Sir Thomas stood Merrylips upon a great chair in the middle of the room.

"And who is there here that knoweth this lad?" he cried.

Before Merrylips could be quite sure of the presence in which she found herself, a slender gentlewoman rose from her seat by the fire. Her brown hair was thickly streaked with gray, and she had the kindest smile in the world.

"Merrylips! My little Merrylips!" she said in a breathless voice, and stretched out her arms.

Thus Merrylips and Lady Sybil found each other again. They were laughing and crying and asking questions long before the others in the parlor had taken breath. But soon Merrylips found them all thronging round her.

Here was her mother, grave and careful as ever, who was glad to see her, but not over-pleased at her dress. And indeed, for a little girl who had been sent away to receive such nurture as became a maid, Merrylips had come home in strange attire.

Here was sister Puss, who was a tall young gentlewoman now, and fairer even than Betteris or Allison Fowell. Here was Pug, who was rosier and rounder than ever. If you will believe it, she was hemming a napkin, just as Merrylips remembered her, for all the world as if she had come out of *A Garland of Virtuous Dames!*

And here, too, was Merrylips' own maid, Mawkin, who was waiting upon the gentlewomen. She hugged

Merrylips harder than any, and blubbered aloud with joy that she had come safe home at last.

Hardly had the women begun exclaiming over Merrylips, when in came more company. Her brother, Longkin, came in his lieutenant's dress. He was grown such a fine young gallant that Merrylips found it hard to believe that he had ever done such an undignified thing as to romp with his brothers on the terrace. After Longkin, Flip came running. He was all legs and arms, and he squeezed Merrylips as if she were a bear or another boy.

"And oh! Flip," she heard her own voice saying, "I ha' been to the wars, for all I am but a wench! I ha' been in a siege, and fired upon a many times, and chased by the enemy, and a prisoner among the Roundheads. And thou, what battles hast thou been fighting, Flip?"

"I'm a gentleman volunteer!" cried Flip, very red and angry. "If father would let me ride into battle, I'd speedily show thee what mettle I am made of."

Now that she had begun squabbling with Flip, Merrylips felt that she had indeed come home. So it seemed quite a matter of course, when presently she found herself seated by the fire, with her hand in Lady Sybil's hand, and telling all her strange adventures.

While she was speaking, Sir Thomas Venner remembered the courtesy that he owed Lord Caversham's envoy. He went from the room, and Longkin, too, when he heard that the envoy was his old college mate, Dick Fowell, hurried out to speak with him. Merrylips wondered if this were the hour when her father would hear Rupert's story. While she wondered, she rambled in her talk and grew silent. Then her godmother vowed that she must be weary and sleepy and were best in bed.

"All the rest thou shalt tell us on the morrow, heart's dearest," she said.

So Lady Sybil led Merrylips to her own chamber and helped her to her own bed. In the pale candlelight, when they two were alone, they said many things that they would not say downstairs. And Merrylips told how often she had thought about her godmother, and had tried to do what would please her, both as a girl and as a little boy.

They were talking thus together, while Merrylips sat up in bed, with her head on Lady Sybil's shoulder, just as she had sat in twilight talks at Larkland, when there came a tap at the door.

"Oh, your Ladyship!" cried Mawkin's voice. "Sir Thomas doth pray you, of your courtesy, come unto his study."

Then Merrylips guessed that Lady Sybil was to hear the great news about Rupert, and she cried: —

"Oh, godmother, prithee go quickly! 'Tis such rare news!"

But as she saw Lady Sybil rise from beside her bed, she felt a sharp little stab of fear, and perhaps of jealousy. She caught at her godmother's gown with one hand.

"But pray you, kiss me first," she said. "For it may be, presently, you will not have so much love to give unto me."

"Thou silly child!" whispered Lady Sybil, and kissed her, and went her way.

Merrylips knew that she was silly. But she was very tired, now that the day was ended, and she could not help having sad thoughts. As she lay alone in the quiet chamber, she pictured how Lady Sybil, at that very moment, was opening her arms to a child that was blood-kin to her. Her heart grew heavy. How did she know that Rupert would not take her place in Lady Sybil's love?

In that foolish fear Merrylips had fallen asleep. When she woke, it was dark, but she found herself clasped tight in two arms, and she heard Lady Sybil speak: —

"And thou couldst think I had not love enough

for two —oh! thou little silly one! Merrylips! Little true heart, that didst believe in my poor lad, even when I myself distrusted him! Oh, child, how can I ever love thee enough — thou, through whom, under God, my dead sister's son hath this hour been given unto me!"

CHAPTER XXXV

THE PASSING OF TIBBOTT VENNER

WHEN Merrylips woke next morning, she thought at first that she was back at Monksfield. She could hear the sounds that she loved — the clatter of horses ridden over flagged pavements, and the note of a trumpet that bade the men dismount and unsaddle. Then she guessed that Captain Norris and his troop had come to Walsover, as Lieutenant Crashaw had said they would.

She was all eagerness to see her old friends. So she sprang up and started to dress. But when she looked for her shirt and her blue breeches, they were not on the form where she had laid them. In their place was a girl's long smock and a little gown of gray that Pug had outgrown.

She was sitting on her bed, looking at the gray gown and winking fast, when Lady Sybil came softly into the chamber. Lady Sybil understood. She did not ask questions, nor did she pretend that this was a slight thing that Merrylips must do.

"Little lass!" she said with a world of meaning. "My little lass!"

"Ay," Merrylips answered. "I am a lass, when all's said. I must put on this gown, no doubt, and oh! a petticoat is such a pestilence thing in which to climb!"

Then she stood up, but before she dressed she asked:

"Where hath my mother hid my clothes — my Tibbott clothes?"

Lady Sybil smiled, a little sadly, to see how quick Merrylips was to guess that it was Lady Venner who had ordered her back into her fit attire. But she told Merrylips where the little blue suit lay, in a chest in a far chamber. And as soon as Merrylips had flung on the girl's frock, she ran and fetched her boy's suit, even the gloves and the hat, and hung them in Lady Sybil's great wardrobe.

"I'm fain to have them where I may look upon them," she said. "And maybe, for sport, I'll don them again, only for an hour."

She looked to see if Lady Sybil would forbid, but Lady Sybil said never a word.

"On Christmas Day," said Merrylips, then. "Shall we say Christmas Day? I'll go a-masking in them."

So every night, when she laid off her girl's frock, she looked at her blue doublet and breeches that hung in

the wardrobe, and fingered them, and said to herself: —

"Six days more —" or five, or four, as it might be — "and 'twill be Christmas, and godmother doth not forbid, and I shall wear my boy's dress once again."

The days before Christmas went fast in that great, busy garrison house of Walsover, and they went fast indeed for Merrylips. So much she had to tell and hear! So many friends she had to greet again!

She found old Roger that had been butler at Larkland. He was carrying a halberd once more in the Walsover garrison, and he was as eager as any young man of them all to fight the rebels. She found Stephen Plasket, who came limping in, the day before Christmas. And a long story he had to tell of the adventures he had met with in making his escape through the Roundhead country! Best of all, for Rupert's sake, she found Claus Hinkel, who had been one of those that had lived through the assault of Monksfield.

Claus took it all as a matter of course that Rupert was at last restored to his kinsfolk. Ja, wohl, 'twas bound to happen some day, he told her. And now, in time, Rupert would be a captain like his father before him, and he, Claus, would ride in his troop.

"For that I can do, gracious fräulein," the dull-witted fellow said. "My lord, your high-born father,

would have made me a corporal, and more, perchance. But I said 'No! no!' Here I am well placed, and can do my part. But if I were set higher, I should be but what you call a laughing-stock."

Many and many another of the old Monksfield garrison were missing, besides Lieutenant Digby. But Lieutenant Crashaw, and Captain Norris, and Captain Brooke, with his arm in a sling, and Nick Slanning, who limped with a newly healed wound, were all at Walsover.

Merrylips talked with them, but she was shy, almost as if they were new acquaintances. And they themselves seemed somehow shy of her. Once Slanning started to tousle her hair, as he had used to do, and craved her pardon for it. Captain Brooke and Captain Norris were too busy to speak with a little girl. And since she was no longer a little boy, she could not run about the courts and stables at their heels.

So she found herself passing many hours with her mother and her godmother and her sisters. She did not like Pug, for Pug said that Dick Fowell was a wicked rebel, and would not speak a word to him. But she liked tall, pretty Puss. For Puss was always asking questions about Dick, and often and often she spoke with him. Indeed, Dick seemed to spend more time with Puss than with Longkin, for whose sake it

was that he said that he was staying to keep Christmas at Walsover.

It was Puss too that told Merrylips about Lady Sybil. After she left Larkland Lady Sybil had gone among great folk in foreign lands, and borrowed money for the king. It was difficult, delicate work, such as few might be trusted with. Then she had brought the money over seas with her, through dangers of storm and of pursuit by the enemy's ships that might have daunted the courage even of a man. And when she had done this task, she had gone to the king's head-quarters at Oxford, and there, with her skill in nursing, she had tended the wounded soldiers, and thus had come by an illness that had been almost mortal.

Merrylips pondered all this. She had always seen Lady Sybil gracious and gentle and quiet. She had not guessed that she had courage and constancy equal to that of a soldier. She had not dreamed that women could have such courage.

But Merrylips was not always with the women, for Rupert and Flip were near enough of her age to make her a comrade. Flip would have been a little scornful, perhaps. He could not forgive Merrylips for having had such adventures, while he sat tamely at home and got his lessons.

But Rupert would have her with them in every sport

and study in which she could bear a part. He liked her in her girl's dress, and told her so.

"Thou art fairer than any girl or woman in all the world," he said, "except it be my aunt Sybil."

Rupert was very proud of the beautiful kinswoman that had taken him for her own. At first he was half ashamed to show his pride and love, but very soon, of his own will, he imitated Merrylips, as he did in many things, and would come with her to sit by Lady Sybil in the twilight and ask questions and talk of what was near his heart.

One evening, the eve of Christmas, as it chanced, they three were together. They sat in the great oriel window of the long gallery. Merrylips was at Lady Sybil's side, where she could look out and see the frosty stars, and Rupert was on a cushion at her feet. They had been speaking, as they sometimes did, of how, when Rupert had had lessons for a couple of years, as was fitting for such a young boy, he should have a commission as an officer of the king, and of all the fine things that he should have and do in years to come.

Then after a silence Rupert spoke, in the darkness: —

"Good Aunt Sybil, I ha' been thinking, if 'twere not for what Merrylips did and I did mock her for, I should never ha' been more than a horseboy all my life."

And he went on, with his head against Lady Sybil's knee: —

"For if she had not had the heart to pity Dick Fowell, why, then, she had never known him. And so, at Ryeborough, he had been but as any rebel officer, and she had never dared call on him for help. And," he said truthfully, "I know not what would ha' happened me then, there at the Spotted Dog. But surely we should never have come into Lord Caversham's presence, and there would 'a' been none to say with surety that I was my father's son. So 'tis all thanks to Merrylips that I am here, because she had pity on Dick Fowell. Had you thought on that, good aunt?"

"Why, indeed, I may have thought it, Robin, lad," said Lady Sybil, and in the darkness Merrylips felt her cheeks burn hot.

Now the next day was Christmas, and when Merrylips woke, she went to the wardrobe to take down her Tibbott clothes. But just then Lady Sybil came into the chamber, and with her came Mawkin. Across her arm Mawkin bore a little gown of russet velvet. It had puffed sleeves and a short bodice, and the square neck and short sleeves were edged with deep lace.

"Oh!" said Merrylips. "'Tis for a little girl. Is it for me?"

"For thee. A fairing that I brought thee out of France," said Lady Sybil.

Merrylips looked up from the dainty gown and laughed.

"Indeed," she said, "I fear you are bribing me, godmother, not to wear my Tibbott clothes."

"Nay," said her godmother, "don them this day, at whatever hour liketh thee best. Thy mother hath given her free consent."

Merrylips looked at the blue doublet and breeches, and she looked at the gown of russet velvet. She hesitated, for indeed she wished to do as she had planned. But the russet gown was pretty, and she did not like to slight her godmother's gift. Besides she had all day in which to wear her boy's dress.

So she let herself be clad in the velvet gown. There went with it a fine wrought smock, and silken stockings, and dainty shoes of soft brown leather. Last of all Lady Sybil fastened round her neck a slender chain of silver, with a tiny heart-shaped pendant.

"Wear this, dear, in the place of the ring that thou hast worn so long," she said. "And that I will lay by for now, with our Robin's ring —" for so she called Rupert — "until such time as thy finger is big enough to fit it snugly, and then thou shalt have it for thine own."

In the velvet dress, it seemed to Merrylips, when she

glanced into the mirror, that she looked taller and older. So she bore herself more shyly and quietly than ever she had done. She would make up for it, she thought, and romp with the noisiest, when she had put on the Tibbott clothes.

But she was glad that she had put on the girl's dress first. For that Christmas morning there was dancing in the long east parlor. And Merrylips danced a minuet with Munn. She was much afraid lest she had forgotten Lady Sybil's teachings and should make false steps and vex him. But she found that she could dance fairly, and Munn was very gallant to her. Then Flip would dance with her too. And Merrylips found it no less pleasant to be treated courteously by her brothers than to go to fisticuffs with them.

Of course there was great feasting that day in the hall at Walsover. But at last the candles were lit, and the women rose and left Sir Thomas and his officers to drink their wine. But before they left the room Sir Thomas stood up in his place and proposed a health to Lady Sybil Fernefould. All those who were present must have known of her courage and her devotion to the cause they served, for they drank her health, every man of them, with full honors and cheers that made Merrylips' heart beat quicker.

When Lady Sybil had thanked them, sweetly and

fairly, Captain Norris leaned across the table and spoke in a low voice to Sir Thomas. Sir Thomas smiled and called Merrylips to him.

She went gravely, in her girl's frock. Under so many eyes she was glad that it was a girl's frock. Her father helped her to stand upon the stool beside him. Then Captain Norris, who she thought had quite forgotten her, spoke respectfully, as if he spoke of a grown woman, and bade them drink a health to Mistress Sybil Venner, a brave and loyal servant of the king!

She could not believe that it was for her that the cups were drained, and the swords flashed out, and the cheers given. She looked at all the faces that were turned toward her — Captain Norris, and Captain Brooke, and Crashaw, and Slanning, and Dick Fowell, and her brothers, and all her father's officers, kinsmen and friends whom from of old she knew. She pressed her two hands to her throat, and for an instant she wanted to cry.

She could not speak as Lady Sybil had spoken to thank them. She put out her two hands uncertainly, and then, for it was Christmas, when men's hearts are tender to little children, they came to her, one by one, those tall officers, and kissed her hand, with all courtesy.

Well, it was over, all but a memory that she should never lose! She was out of the hall, and up in her chamber. There presently Lady Sybil sought her, and found her on her knees, by a chest that stood beneath the window. She was folding away the little suit that Tibbott Venner had worn.

"Little — lass?" said Lady Sybil, and stroked her hair.

"Yes," said Merrylips.

Her face was still rosy, and her eyes sparkled with the thought of what had happened in the hall.

"For since I cannot be a boy," she hurried on, "I will not play at being a boy. Besides, there be some things that a truly boy must do and bear and see — Oh, godmother! There at Monksfield, that day when I found Dick — I knew then that I was fain to be a girl.

"And some things too," she added, in a lower voice, "a girl may have perchance that belong not to a boy. Oh, godmother, is't strange and wicked that I should think so?"

"Nay, not strange," said Lady Sybil, "nor all wicked, perchance. Only see to it that thou still art brave and true, even as a lad."

"Or as you are, sweet godmother," whispered Merrylips. "Surely you are as brave and loyal, every whit,

as if you were a soldier like my father. And I'll try to be such a gentlewoman as you — indeed I'll try!"

So speaking, Merrylips shut the lid of the chest. She smiled, but she gave a little sigh, too, as she said: —

"Fare thee well! I'm a lass — godmother's lass — henceforth! Fare thee well, Tibbott Venner, forever and ever!"

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